

## Friends of Indian Health

June 26, 2014

Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D.  
Director  
National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Dr. Collins:

Our organizations are aware that the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) will be selecting a new director. As organizations who advocate for improving the health needs and reducing the disparity of disease of American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs), it has been our experience that often when addressing minority health research needs, less attention is focused on Native Americans than other minority communities.

Therefore, we would like to offer several recommendations as NIH undertakes the process of selecting the next NIMHD director. These recommendations are directed at strengthening NIH's responsiveness to AI/AN health research needs, concerns, and priorities, which include the following:

- **Establish an American Indian and Alaska Native Research Coordinator in the NIMHD**

The recent release of a research paper in the [American Journal of Public Health](#) outlining the alarming health conditions of the American Indian and Alaska Native population was indeed sobering. As the paper points out, "AI/AN populations continue to experience much higher death rates than Whites." The research showed great disparities in mortality rates for men and women, but also noted "the most prominent disparity for all-cause death rates are concentrated in the younger age groups." Diabetes, tobacco use, and alcohol abuse are cited as main influences for causing such disparities. More research is needed to address medical, dental and mental health issues associated with these contributing factors especially to protect future generations.

Based on feedback from multiple sources involved with research within AI/AN populations, NIMHD has not had an AI/AN-focused research coordinator nor has the Institute provided strong and consistent support for AI/AN research endeavors. Thus, establishing an AI/AN Research coordinator within NIMHD would be appropriate and justified in terms of health equity, while enhancing attention and support for further AI/AN health research.

- **Establish an AI/AN Liaison within the NIH (National Institutes of Health) Office of the Director**

Given the unique relationship between federally recognized sovereign tribal governments and the federal government, establishing an AI/AN Liaison within the Office of the Director would begin to address the complex and often poorly understood issues that are germane to AI/AN related research across the expanse of the NIH. Again, feedback from several sources associated with AI/AN health research acknowledge the difficulties that have periodically occurred at the NIH due to an apparent lack of understanding and coordination, despite their best intentions.

Additionally, tribes do value the need for participatory research, but they remain apprehensive because of past history. Too many times, researchers gathered their information, but did not share it or help tribes to use the results to improve their people's health.

There are many well qualified Native Americans who have extensive experience in Indian health policy and health research, the integration of traditional Native American and Western medicine, and the importance of acknowledging AI/AN male and female health disparities. Our organizations would be glad to work with you to find the right candidates for these recommended positions.

Thank you for considering our request. If you would like further information regarding our concerns, please contact Judy Sherman at (202) 309-2047 or [shermanj@ada.org](mailto:shermanj@ada.org).

Sincerely yours,

American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine  
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy  
American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
American Dental Association  
American Psychological Association  
California Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors  
International Certification and Reciprocity Consortium (IC&RC)  
Men's Health Network