

BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH

Rejecting 'Big Science' Tag, Collins Sets Five Themes for NIH

The new director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) laid out his priorities this week, spending his 1st day on the job speaking to his staff and reporters. Physician-geneticist Francis Collins said he plans to emphasize five “themes,” including health care reform and translating research into medicine. Collins also sought to allay perhaps the biggest concerns about his nomination last month by President Barack Obama, saying that he will protect investigator-initiated science and that his religious interests will not influence how he runs the agency.

Collins, who in 2008 stepped down after 15 years as director of NIH's genome institute, spoke publicly about his ideas for the first time since his name surfaced as the leading candidate to head the agency. In a town hall meeting with NIH staff, he said he now has an “exciting, daunting, and perhaps the most amazing job that anybody could ever ask for.” He assured a large crowd that “the mainstay” of NIH will be the individual investigator; anybody who thinks otherwise “need look no further” than the genome institute's intramural program, where research is “driven by ideas” and where he will keep his lab.

At the same time, large biology projects are one of Collins's five priorities. He will promote high-throughput technologies in areas that are “poised for this kind of approach,” such as gene transcription and autism studies. He expects to emphasize translational research, such as a new NIH program to develop drugs for rare diseases. The



Quick study. NIH Director Francis Collins spent his first day on the job explaining his vision for NIH.

three other themes are health care reform, including research comparing treatments, which he said NIH “should embrace”; global health; and “empower[ing] the biomedical research community,” which he said includes sustained funding, encouraging young investigators, and funding innovative research.

Collins said that “job one” is dealing with what happens when the \$10.4 billion that NIH received as part of this year's stimulus package runs out in 2011. NIH faces “a perfect storm,” he said, partly driven by a flood of more than 20,000 applications for stimulus-funded grants, that could bring record-low success rates if the agency's budget doesn't rise above the current \$30.6 billion. He will argue for more funding by telling Congress that NIH funding stimulates local economies and by emphasizing “themes that clearly resonate.” He noted that \$40 billion, which some groups are pushing for, is “within [the] envelope” of what NIH would need to restore losses to inflation since 2003.

Collins also addressed concerns that he said have “graced many pages of the blogosphere,” as well as the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, that his evangelical Christian beliefs could influence how he runs NIH. He has resigned from BioLogos, the foundation exploring science and faith that he started. He told reporters that those “personal interests ... will not interfere with the judgments that I will need to make as the director of the NIH.”

As for management issues, Collins has chosen to retain Raynard Kington as his principal deputy director. Kington served in that position until becoming acting NIH director after Elias Zerhouni resigned last fall. Collins expects to hold off on finding a permanent director for the alcoholism institute because of an ongoing discussion about whether it should merge with NIH's drug addiction institute.

Asked about NIH's intramural program, he said he is “resistant to the idea that [the program] is in need of some sort of dramatic redo” but is pondering whether to create a pool of intramural money that, like NIH's Common Fund, could be used to fund crosscutting research quickly.

—JOCELYN KAISER

ScienceNOW.org

From *Science's*
Online Daily News Site



Dogs Are No Mind Readers

Despite thousands of years of domestication, dogs have a hard time figuring out what humans are thinking. That's the conclusion of a new study, which shows that dogs continue to trust unreliable people and therefore lack a so-called theory of mind. <http://bit.ly/358Y2a>

The Social Life of Your Cell Phone

Your cell phone may know more about your private life than you do, according to a new study of mobile phone calls. This insight opens the door to mining massive data sets from mobile phone call logs, which should allow researchers to test theories on how relationship networks make or break businesses, shape the flow of information, and even affect the course of epidemics. <http://bit.ly/3HK2sa>

Weight Loss for Batteries

With \$27 billion a year in sales, lithium-ion batteries already dominate the market for rechargeables. But there's always pressure to do better. Now researchers report that they've come up with a way to use nanotechnology to either significantly increase the energy-storage capacity of lithium-ion batteries or reduce their weight while maintaining their current energy content. The new work could lead to everything from lighter laptops to electric cars with a considerably longer range. <http://bit.ly/laG8f>

Neandertals Led Bitter Lives

Humans vary genetically in their ability to taste a bitter chemical known as phenylthiocarbamide, which elicits the same response as bitter flavors in Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and broccoli. A new study finds that our close relatives, Neandertals, also had varied tastes for bitter food, suggesting that differences in the ability to detect bitterness stretch back at least half a million years. <http://bit.ly/gj9EJ>

Read the full postings, comments, and more on sciencenow.sciencemag.org.