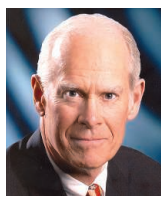
EDITORIAL

Time to speak up for research



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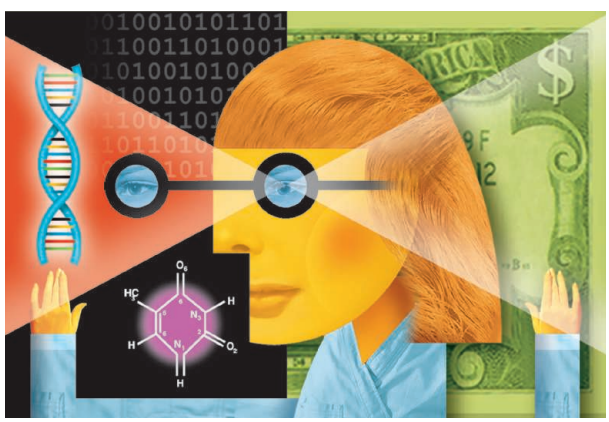
As U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Francis Collins stated in recent testimony to Congress, "Our nation has never witnessed a time of greater promise for advances in medicine." Researchers are moving closer to developing a universal flu vaccine, cancer immunotherapy (harnessing the immune system to attack tumor cells) is on the horizon, and the public/private BRAIN initiative will provide deeper knowledge of billions of nerve cells to advance research on Alzheimer's disease, autism, and other braindisorders. Yet the general public, and in particular elected officials, have failed to embrace the promise of cutting-edge science as a means to improve health and the economy.



"Scientists must take off their lab coats and engage the people of their communities and states."

Federal funding for research and innovation in the United States is on the decline; NIH's budget for fiscal year 2014 (FY14) is 11.7% below the FY04 peak.* The pain of budget cuts extends beyond the science community to the patients and families who await cures. With sequestration-level spending still the law of the land, new therapies that could save lives, improve the quality of life, and reduce health care costs will remain out of reach. If a treatment became available in 2015 that delayed the onset of Alzheimer's disease by 5 years—similar to anticholesterol drugs preventing heart disease—annual Medicare and Medicaid spending would be $42 billion less by 2020.† Policy-makers who are determined to shrink the size of government should also remember that they have a responsibility to stabilize the economy and address costs that have nothing to do with the size of federal agencies. Cutting research is not a pathway to deficit reduction; it is a pathway to increased health threats, lost lives, and economic insecurity. The real money needed to control the nation's long-term deficit can be found in the entitlement reform and tax reform issues that policy-makers are reluctant to tackle, even more so during an election year.

Inspiration is needed to bolster public appreciation for science and support for making federal funding for research a very high national priority. We must seize the opportunity to cultivate more champions for research. Yet there has been little outreach by scientists to the public to help them understand how science contributes to better health, job creation, and global competitiveness. Few Americans can name a living scientist or an institution where research takes place, according to polling commissioned by Research!America.‡ To put it bluntly, scientists remain largely invisible to the public. Yes, this says a great deal about the nation's people, but it says even more about scientists and their lack of engagement with the public.

The midterm elections this year provide an opportunity for scientists to become stronger advocates for research and converse with citizens to a much greater degree. Attend campaign debates and speak up about the health and economic benefits of research. Offer to be a scientific advisor for candidates or help them create a science advisory committee that can play a critical role in shaping policy. Write op-eds and letters to the editor about the latest medical breakthroughs and their implications for treating and preventing disease. Volunteer to speak at local organizations and chambers of commerce.

Scientists must take off their lab coats and engage the people of their communities and states. They must be willing to defend and spread the good news about science. If scientists themselves are unwilling to defend science, how can we expect others to do so?

– John Edward Porter

*www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/NIHBud_1.jpg. †www.alz.org/documents_custom/trajectory.pdf. ‡www.researchamerica.org/uploads/MostAmericansCantNameaLivingScientist.pdf.

10.1126/science.1256929

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Science **344** (6189), 1207.
DOI: 10.1126/science.1256929