



National Eating Disorders Association



December 31, 2008

Dear President Elect Obama,

Congratulations on your victory and thank you so very much for inviting comments and recommendations from afar concerning the National Institutes of Health. I do, indeed, have comments that I hope will be heard by your administration, on behalf of millions of people. In short, NIH must invest more heavily in NIMH, on behalf of our country's current and future mental health. And, within that increase in mental health research, we urge more research be done in the field of eating disorders.

I have been a participant in meetings with NIMH Director Thomas Insel for the past five years. His leadership, passion, knowledge, encouragement and efforts to those of us representing individuals and families affected by mental illness are extraordinary. However, it is obvious that the work of NIMH, has been handicapped by inequitable budgets, when we look at the total expenditures invested for other health research. As we all know, without our mental health intact, all else can be meaningless. Quite simply, mental health has not appeared to have been as significant a priority within NIH as it should have been, and that needs to change.

Mental illnesses cost the nation over \$300 billion dollars in direct and indirect support (indirect support includes social services and lost income from unemployment). That is more than \$1000 for every American, yet we are spending less than \$5 per American per year to understand how to prevent and treat these illnesses better. I don't think it is useful to pit one disease against another, but there is a great argument to be made for investing much more in biomedical research, not only because of the public health needs but because of the scientific opportunities, many of which could not have been imagined a decade ago. This is especially true of mental illnesses, like anorexia nervosa, which can now be understood as brain disorders caused by very specific risk genes combined with developmental factors. Mental illnesses are "the chronic diseases of young people in this country". We cannot ignore them or hope they disappear on their own.

The most compelling argument I can make for increased research funding is about opportunity - there is so much we can do right now if we only invest in new knowledge. It is this investment that will ultimately reduce the emotional and financial costs of these illnesses. It is in everyone's best interest, emotions aside, to take on the challenge of fighting mental illness as soundly and as determined as we take on heart disease and cancer.



I speak not only as the CEO of the National Eating Disorders Association – representing those with Anorexia, a disease that has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness – but also as a mother of two adopted, now grown children from Korea. Both of my children suffer from serious mental illnesses.

I urge serious re-evaluations of the funding allotted for mental health research. It is my belief that we will find advances if we invest today. There is much talk about increased investments for environmental technology, transportation and infrastructure projects, stem cell research etc., all of which I support. However, I hear little to nothing about taking care of our “brain.” Millions upon millions will benefit from that investment in mental health research for years to come. Eating Disorders alone are harming, and sometimes killing, young people. Mental health impairment is not something that families or anyone plans for, yet the costs in today’s society are enormous.

Thank you for inviting our comments and for your attention to our plea. I would be happy to follow up to provide you with any details, data, testimony from mental health professionals, or individuals or families affected by eating disorders and/or other mental illnesses.

Sincerely,

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Chief Executive Officer



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