



December 7, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden and Senior White House Officials,

Dr. Francis Collins stepping down from his leadership of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) presents an opportunity to sharpen the focus of NIH leadership on the most pressing health problems in this nation. The importance of social and behavioral drivers of health is clearer now than ever before, as we wrestle with the ongoing pandemic, reckon with overdue racial justice, and mobilize to address the health impacts of the climate crisis. As the Biden Administration identifies a nominee to replace Dr. Collins and seeks to build on his stellar tenure at the NIH, we hope strong consideration will be given to individuals who understand the critical importance of behavioral medicine in our nation's efforts to improve health and healthcare.

Most health challenges have behavioral origins and behavioral solutions. Behavioral medicine is an interdisciplinary field comprised of researchers, clinicians, educators, industry professionals, and public health experts who work to improve and sustain health through behavior change. They work to understand, prevent, and treat chronic diseases. They conduct research and translate findings into real-world settings to improve lives while also reducing healthcare costs.

Mask-wearing, hand washing and vaccination uptake are behavioral countermeasures that slow coronavirus transmission. Disparities in health behaviors, such as smoking, physical activity, healthy diets, stress management, and health screenings (to name but a few examples), serve as barriers to health equity. Many of these disparities are further amplified by the climate crisis as Americans face more extreme weather conditions that interfere with health behaviors and natural disasters that threaten mental health.

Behavioral medicine also focuses on the top causes of mortality in the United States (e.g., cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, diabetes, and cancer) and the behavioral risk factors that are relevant for a broad spectrum of disease prevention (e.g., tobacco use, obesity, sedentary lifestyle, unhealthy eating). Consider:

- 40-60% of chronic disease burden - the burden on the patients with chronic disease, and on the healthcare system that must care for them - is attributable to lifestyle and the conditions under which people live.
- Lifestyle contributes more to the likelihood of a person having a heart attack than almost anything else. Indeed, a person with low genetic risk and a poor



lifestyle is more likely to have a heart attack than a person with high genetic risk and a healthy lifestyle.

- Successful efforts to reduce chronic disease risk by promoting a healthy lifestyle are reported almost monthly in leading medical journals. For example, much of the smoking cessation and diabetes prevention work that has taken place the last several decades in the U.S. is based on behavioral medicine findings and interventions. The Diabetes Prevention Project demonstrated that initiating and maintaining physical activity and healthy food choices was more effective than medications for delaying the onset of diabetes.
- The remarkable effort to develop and deliver vaccines in response to COVID-19 has been impeded by the difficulty of getting shots in arms. Dr. Collins has noted in recent interviews: “Was there something else we should have done... Maybe investing more in the behavioral research side of this.”

Behavioral medicine and the evidence generated by scientists working in this field are more important than ever. An NIH director who understands this will be well-positioned to make great strides in improving health in the United States. As you select your nominee for this critical post, we ask you to ensure that the incoming director has a genuine commitment to increasing the NIH’s role in addressing social and behavioral drivers of health.

Thank you for your consideration and please let us know if additional information would be useful.

Sincerely,

The Society of Behavioral Medicine

Acknowledgements: This letter prepared with input and wording from SBM Member Matthew M. Burg, PhD.