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NIDA at 30: Committed to Scientific Solutions for Drug Addiction Problems

Director's
Vol. 19, No. 1

By **NIDA Director Nora D. Volkow, M.D.**



This year, NIDA celebrates 30 years of scientific inquiry marked by tremendous strides in advancing the frontiers of drug abuse research and reducing the suffering, community disruption, and public health costs of drug addiction. In 1974, NIDA was a small institute striving to develop an effective Federal response to a critical public health crisis--burgeoning drug abuse in the United States. Today, the Institute is the world's foremost source of scientific knowledge on the prevention and treatment of the chronic, relapsing brain disorder of drug addiction.

In its first decade, NIDA established national data-collection systems to increase understanding of the nature and extent of drug abuse. In addition to developing a nationwide network of treatment, prevention, and clinical and research training programs, the Institute also initiated a basic science research program that produced groundbreaking discoveries on the brain and its molecular and neurochemical methods of communication. Today, scientists draw on these discoveries to create new medications to treat drug abuse and other mental disorders.

In 1981, a congressional mandate shifted NIDA's primary mission to expanding the borders of scientific knowledge about drug addiction and ensuring that this knowledge be used to prevent and treat the disease. Throughout the 1980s, NIDA-supported researchers mined information on the causes, correlates, and consequences of drug abuse and addiction and generated a range of prevention and treatment approaches for heroin, marijuana, and nicotine abuse and the new



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threat of crack cocaine. As a result, practitioners today have highly effective opiate and nicotine treatment medications, a range of behavioral treatments for cocaine abuse, and the underlying principles of successful prevention and treatment to use in reducing drug abuse.

In 1986, the Nation once again turned to NIDA, this time for help in addressing the emerging AIDS epidemic. Within a year, NIDA nearly tripled its research on AIDS and drug abuse to address the major role injection drug use plays in transmitting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. The Institute's massive effort rapidly established AIDS outreach projects around the country, educated out-of-treatment drug users and their sex partners on ways to prevent HIV transmission, and proved that these approaches could reduce the risky drug use and sexual behaviors that were fueling the spread of HIV/AIDS. This body of AIDS research, bolstered by an additional decade of AIDS discoveries, informs the NIDA-promulgated principles of HIV prevention among drug users that now curb the spread of HIV/AIDS.

In 1992, Congress affirmed the importance of NIDA's research to the Nation's public health when it made NIDA part of the National Institutes of Health, the world's premier biomedical research agency. During the ensuing decade, NIDA mounted major new research and communications programs to counter alarming increases in young people's use of methamphetamine, heroin, and "club drugs," such as ecstasy (MDMA). The Institute's basic and clinical research programs applied revolutionary new techniques in molecular biology and brain imaging technologies to rapidly advance understanding of the underlying neurobiological and behavioral processes that increase vulnerability to drug abuse, foster the transition to addiction, and prevent many patients from achieving successful treatment results. At the same time, NIDA launched new initiatives to close the gap between research and practice. As a result, drug abuse scientists and practitioners now are collaborating to improve drug abuse prevention and treatment research and services in communities across America.

With its outriders of mental illness, HIV/AIDS, and hepatitis C; its public health and criminal justice costs; and its devastation of homes and neighborhoods, drug addiction continues to demand a comprehensive research program focused on these problems. NIDA has assembled such a program and remains committed to its purpose--the alleviation of suffering through scientific advance.

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