



July 7, 2010

National Institutes of Health
National Institute of Mental Health
6001 Executive Blvd.
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-1501

Dear Senator Grassley:

In the past several years, the NIH intramural and extramural research communities have responded to revelations about scientific conflicts of interest by conducting an unprecedented evaluation of long-standing rules and procedures. In 2005, NIH issued new regulations for its own scientists that effectively ban all financial relationships with the pharmaceutical industry. On May 20, NIH proposed new ethics rules for extramural researchers that will require greater disclosure of significant financial interests by faculty, more reporting to NIH of financial conflicts and their management, and disclosure to the public of conflicts on the Web.

These reforms are in large measure due to investigations that you have conducted in your capacity as a member of the Senate Committee on Finance. I believe such reforms are necessary. Even the appearance of conflicts of interest can taint research findings and possibly delay the translation of discoveries into better cures, diagnostics and therapies for patients in the United States and across the world.

I hope you will allow me to address directly your recent questions about my involvement with Dr. Charles Nemeroff. As you know, Dr. Nemeroff, until recently, was one of the leading academic psychiatrists in the country who had built a successful department at Emory University. His failure to disclose large sums of income from industry was an egregious violation of NIH policy and university rules and led Emory University to prohibit him from applying for NIH grants. I do not condone the gap in our policy that allowed him to avoid the penalty implemented by Emory by moving to another university, and I am hopeful that, through the pending Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, NIH will be able to address this gap. I now recognize that my willingness to speak with a University of Miami official about Dr. Nemeroff's eligibility for continued research funding from the NIH may have created the appearance of favoritism. In retrospect, I regret that my actions, although routine in the case of other recruitments, appear inappropriate for a Federal research official given my past association with Dr. Nemeroff.

Please know that I have recused myself from all matters involving Dr. Nemeroff. While I have had no contact with Dr. Nemeroff for many months to avoid any possibility of a perception of either positive or negative bias, I will recuse myself from future applications or NIH matters involving Dr. Nemeroff.

Finally, I want to assure you that the publicity surrounding this experience has not done justice to my aggressive stance on conflict of interest matters involving academic scientists applying for NIMH grants. I personally have called on psychiatrists to address the culture of influence that has led to a loss of trust in this discipline (JAMA, March 2010). We are currently creating online tools to educate young psychiatrists about conflict of interest issues and the need to separate science from marketing. I realize that as a Federal research funding official, it is not enough to adhere to the principles embodied in Federal regulation. Conflict of interest is an area of concern where we at NIH can lead, and in this case, my leadership--while following the regulation--was not in line with the standards I had set for NIMH. Since even the appearance of favoritism or a conflict of interest compromises the public's trust in our research and policy decisions, I will be even more vigilant in carrying out my official duties going forward.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas R. Insel". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "I".

Thomas R. Insel, M.D.
Director