

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 10, 2020

Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D.
Director
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

RE: Foreign Influence in U.S. Medical Research

Dear Dr. Collins,

Thank you for your outstanding work at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). As members of Congress, we understand the importance of biomedical research at the NIH and groundbreaking treatments and cures being developed across the country in universities and research laboratories. We understand from press reports, including locally, that there have been instances of potential foreign influence and interference in taxpayer-funded medical research. We want to better understand the steps NIH is taking to address this issue and protect taxpayer-funded medical discoveries.

We recognize NIH has been warning research institutions over the past few years of concerns around “inappropriate influence” of foreign entities on NIH researchers and peer reviewers.¹ In an August 20, 2018 letter, you outlined efforts NIH was undertaking to attempt to tackle this problem, including “through a working group of the Advisory Committee to the NIH Director to: 1. Improve accurate reporting of all sources of research support, financial interests, and relevant affiliations; 2. Mitigate the risk of IP security while continuing NIH’s long tradition of collaborations with foreign scientists and institutions; and 3. Explore additional steps to protect the integrity of peer review.”² Additional steps NIH is taking were laid out in a November 2019 report by the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs; however, the report points out that while NIH has attempted to address these threats, “significant gaps in grant integrity efforts remain unaddressed.”³ Accordingly, please answer the following questions in writing no later than January 24, 2020:

¹Collins, F. S. (2018, August 20). *NIH Foreign Influence Letter to Grantees*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/media/NIH%20Foreign%20Influence%20Letter%20to%20Grantees%2008-20-18.pdf.

² Ibid.

³Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee: Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. (2019, November 18). Staff Report on Threats to the U.S. Research Enterprise China’s Talent Recruitment Plans. *United States Senate*. Retrieved from <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2019-11-18%20PSI%20Staff%20Report%20-%20China's%20Talent%20Recruitment%20Plans%20Updated2.pdf>.

1. What current steps are you taking to address these gaps and improve and protect the grant review process?
2. NIH estimates that vetting all 27,000 peer reviewers would require more than 100 additional full-time staff.⁴ Has NIH requested the resources to accomplish this review or looked to other cost-effective ways to vet peer reviewers? Have you consulted with national security experts on best practices for vetting as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General recommends?⁵
3. We are also aware that HHS started an initiative in October 2019 to “focus on identifying possible risk, mitigation measures, and technical outreach assistance to U.S. institutions receiving NIH funding.”⁶ How is this initiative progressing? Are you learning new information and ways to improve internal systems and vetting?
4. Finally, as members of the Energy & Commerce Committee with jurisdiction over NIH, we are interested in suggestions of possible legislative action that can help fill the gaps in grant integrity efforts and preventing foreign influence and theft.

The United States has led the world in developing new and innovative treatments and cures that benefit the health of our neighbors, boost local economies and create good-paying jobs. The biomedical research being done at institutions across the country has attracted the best and the brightest and we must continue to support these efforts. It is incumbent upon us to ensure the taxpayers’ investment in these cures and treatments are protected against foreign threats and we look forward to working with you to address this pressing problem. Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to these matters.

Sincerely,



Kathy Castor
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress



Cathy McMorris-Rodgers
Member of Congress



Marc Veasey
Member of Congress

⁴ Murrin, S. (2019, September). Vetting Peer Reviewers at NIH’s Center for Scientific Review: Strengths and Limitations. *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General*. OEI-01-19-000160. Retrieved from <https://oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-01-19-00160.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid, 15-16.

⁶Senate 55.