

RESEARCH THEMES FOR OUR FUTURE

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In May, 2003, when the National Institute of Nursing Research convened the 50th session of our thrice-yearly National Advisory Council meetings, I remarked, "It seems we are not so young anymore." From our early days back in 1986 as the National Center for Nursing research, NINR has developed into a major force in nursing, biobehavioral, and healthcare research. The number of applications we receive for new research projects from nurse scientists has increased steadily each year. Published articles from NINR-funded studies have grown not only in quantity, but also in the quality of their work and the breadth of journals and other publications they reach. And yet, at just over 17 years since our inception, we remain a small, but growing institute. To serve the needs of nursing, the largest healthcare profession, and to manage the ever-evolving complexities of modern health care, we must strive to meet the research challenges of the future.

Last fall, I co-chaired a series of 5 sessions which brought together nearly 100 researchers, clinicians, NINR staff, and other prominent nursing and health care experts. Participants were asked first to identify major research areas of importance in health and health care to address over the next 5 to 10 years, and then to select those considered of highest importance for the future direction of NINR.

After synthesis of this information, a number of themes emerged. I presented "Research Themes for the Future" for discussion and comment at the National Nursing Research Roundtable in March and at the National Advisory Council meeting in the spring. Now posted on our Web site (<http://www.nih.gov/ninr/research/themes.doc>), this document outlines 5 research themes, summarized below with examples of related research topics:

Changing lifestyle behaviors for better health. Many premature deaths can be attributed to unhealthy behaviors. However changing lifestyle habits and reaching all populations in need presents many challenges. Research in this area includes: health promotion through emphasizing healthy behaviors and choices; addressing common health problems prevalent across many populations; determining ethnic and cultural motivational factors for change; and promoting self-management.

Managing the effects of chronic illness to improve quality of life. Chronic diseases affect millions of Americans, and their

impact extends to patients, their families and caretakers, the community, and the health care system. Research in this area includes: healthcare practice and transitioning from hospital to home care; self-management of symptoms and maintaining long-term treatment; and supporting informal caregivers in maintaining their own health and well-being.

Identifying effective strategies to reduce health disparities. All 5 theme groups reaffirmed the overarching goal of *Healthy People 2010*: to reduce health disparities. Research in this area includes culturally sensitive health assessment tools and interventions; delineating health disparities among the most vulnerable members of a population; and identifying stressors and environmental risks.

Harnessing advanced technologies to serve human needs. The technology of health care is evolving rapidly, while advances in our understanding of genetics are revolutionizing how we view health and illness. Research in this area includes: use of biotechnologies and informatics; improving caregiver skill in technology-assisted care; incorporating telehealth interventions and expanding use of the Internet for health monitoring and research dissemination; assessing and minimizing genetic risks; and exploring the basic science and the clinical implications of genetics testing.

Enhancing the end-of-life experience for patients and their families. Many Americans remain dissatisfied with how dying patients and their families experience the health care system. As the lead institute at NIH for end-of-life care, NINR has a continuing obligation to address this delicate phase of life. Research in this area includes: studying the needs of palliative and end-of-life care across all age groups; testing models of palliative care; managing pain and other symptom clusters in dying patients; and enhancing family interactions and decision-making.

Ambrose Bierce defined the future as "that period of time in which our affairs prosper, our friends are true and our happiness is assured." At NINR, we know that in reality, the future brings challenges as well as opportunities. With foresight and planning, with the continued support of our friends in the nursing community, and with the dedication of those who develop, carry out, and implement research, we can pursue our future and continue to prosper in generating the knowledge base that benefits the health and well-being of all Americans. ■