



# Sleep Research Society

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October 17, 2008

Thomas R. Insel, M.D.  
Director  
National Institute of Mental Health  
6001 Executive Boulevard  
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Insel:

We read with great interest the recently released NIMH strategic plan and are writing to express our disappointment that no mention was made of sleep-related issues. The strategic plan fails to acknowledge the well-established importance of sleep to mental health, the role that sleep research has played in improving our understanding of brain function, and the great potential that supporting future sleep research has for advancing the strategic goals of the NIMH.

Sleep disturbances are extremely common in those with psychiatric disorders<sup>1</sup>. A compelling body of research documents the independent importance of sleep disturbance in major depression, post-partum depression, generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, and schizophrenia. Sleep disturbance increases the risks for developing these disorders<sup>2,3</sup> and is an independent predictor of suicidality.<sup>4</sup> Further, treating sleep disturbance improves not only sleep but also the outcome of the associated psychiatric conditions.<sup>5-7</sup> This body of work represents a substantial contribution to three goals of the NIMH strategic plan: improving the prediction, treatment, and possible prevention of psychiatric disorders. The omission of sleep from the plan reflects an omission of this contribution and the potential contribution that supporting future sleep research can have on achieving the objectives of the NIMH strategic plan.

The strategic plan also fails to acknowledge the potential of sleep research for improving the understanding of brain function, which is another stated strategic objective. Recent studies demonstrate that sleep plays an important role in modulating neuronal plasticity and gene expression.<sup>8,9</sup> There is also evidence of alterations in regional brain metabolic activity during sleep and waking in those with sleep disorders.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, a large body of research documents that restricting sleep alters brain function and cognition.<sup>11-13</sup>

We appreciate that many competing considerations must be weighed in preparing the NIMH strategic plan. Including sleep-related issues in this plan promises to better allow the NIMH to meet its aims for the next 5 years and more accurately represents the critical importance of sleep to mental health and brain function.



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Sincerely,

Michael V. Vitiello, PhD  
President, Sleep Research Society

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