



AUTISM SPEAKS™
It's time to listen.

August 14, 2008

Thomas Insel, MD
National Institute of Mental Health
National Institutes of Health
6001 Executive Boulevard
Room 8235, MSC 9669
Bethesda, MD 20892-9669

Re: Public Comment on IACC Strategic Plan for Autism Research

Dear Tom:

We are writing to express concerns that we strongly believe should be addressed before the Strategic Plan (SP) is finalized.

First, we want to stress that, until the SP has clearly defined priorities and objectives and a well-specified budget, the SP will not be effective in accelerating science as intended by the Combating Autism Act (CAA). We trust that clearly defined priorities and objectives, tied to a well-specified budget, will be developed and there will be appropriate time for stakeholder feedback after these elements are incorporated into the SP.

Second, as we expressed in our letter of July 9, 2008, there are still several key issues advocated by the IACC, and included in the CAA, that are not represented in the current draft of the SP. Specifically, the CAA and several IACC members urged a stronger emphasis on environmental factors, gene-environment interaction, and prevention of autism. Of particular concern is that the SP does not explicitly mention that the investigation of the potential role of vaccines in the etiology of autism is needed.

As you are aware, many stakeholders in the autism community remain concerned about the potential role of vaccines in the etiology of autism. While the weight of the evidence does not currently support this hypothesis, several recent developments (e.g. Hannah Poling concession, Dr. Bernadine Healy statements) suggest that more research is warranted. In addition, the legislative history of the CAA very clearly states that more emphasis on exploring the role of environmental factors, including vaccines, is needed. We feel that scientific inquiry into the questions that many stakeholders have regarding the potential role of vaccines in the etiology of autism is the best way to ensure that confidence and trust in our vaccine program is restored and maintained.

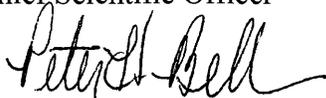
Finally, we are aware that many stakeholders in the autism community have concerns with regard to the strategic planning process. Much like the heterogeneity of autism itself, there is a diversity of viewpoints across the spectrum of autism stakeholders. While there have been efforts to engage as many viewpoints as possible, including the town hall meeting that was part of the planning process, concerns remain among some stakeholders that their views have not been adequately included in the process. We strongly urge you to continue to look for ways to include a diversity of viewpoints and to emphasize to the community when these viewpoints have been solicited and represented during the SP process so that the final SP will accelerate and inspire research as it is intended to do.

We appreciate your thoughtful consideration of these points that will impact the success of the Strategic Plan for Autism Research.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Geri Dawson', written in a cursive style.

Geri Dawson, PhD
Chief Scientific Officer

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Bell', written in a cursive style.

Peter Bell
Executive Vice President