

## COMMENTS/RESPONSES

### WAR ON ALZHEIMER'S?

*To the Editor:* Congress has supposedly declared war on Alzheimer's disease. I say supposedly because there has been no authorization of additional federal research dollars to try to win this war. In 2010, Public Law 111-375, which created the National Alzheimer's Project Act (NAPA) to establish an "integrated national plan to overcome Alzheimer's" and to "accelerate the development of treatments," among many other lofty goals, passed unanimously.<sup>1</sup> However, despite voicing support for NAPA's goals, President Obama has never recommended, nor has Congress ever authorized, any truly significant increases in funding for Alzheimer's research.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) allocated \$457 million to Alzheimer's research in fiscal year 2009, \$450 million in 2010, \$448 million in 2011, \$503 million in 2012, and an estimated \$484 million in 2013, but during each of those same 5 years, the NIH allocated more than \$3 billion of NIH funding for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) research. NIH estimates 2014 spending at

\$3.122 billion for HIV/AIDS—a disease for which there are effective methods of prevention and treatment and with a rapidly falling death rate—but NIH estimates 2014 spending at only \$562 million for Alzheimer's disease—a disease for which there are no effective means of prevention or treatment and with a rising death rate.<sup>2</sup> So where is this war on Alzheimer's disease?

HIV/AIDS is now a disease that can be successfully treated and prevented. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has not listed it as being among the top 15 causes of death in this country since 1997, but HIV/AIDS continues to receive six times the federal research dollars given to Alzheimer's disease, which is the sixth-leading cause of death in this country and the only one among the top 10 causes of death with no effective means of prevention, treatment, or cure.<sup>3</sup> The death rate from HIV/AIDS has fallen 42% in the past decade, whereas the death rate for Alzheimer's disease has risen 68% in the same time period.<sup>4</sup> So where is this war on Alzheimer's disease?

President Obama's 2014 budget includes an additional \$100 million "targeted to expanding research, education, and outreach on Alzheimer's disease, and to improving patient, family, and caregiver support." Although any additional money targeted for Alzheimer's is welcome, this additional money pales in comparison to what President Obama recommends for spending on HIV/AIDS. The president's 2014 budget includes "\$2.4 billion for the Ryan White HIV/AIDS program to continue its critical role in support of patients across the HIV/AIDS continuum." That allocation includes \$943 million to provide "life-saving and life-extending medications to 218,900 individuals."<sup>5</sup> That is \$100 million more for Alzheimer's disease but \$2.4 billion more for HIV/AIDS, so where is this war on Alzheimer's disease?

According to the most recent CDC mortality data, in 2010, an estimated 1.1 million people were living in the United States with a diagnosis of AIDS, and the estimated number of people who died with an AIDS diagnosis was 15,529; in that same year, of the estimated 5.2 million people living in the United States with Alzheimer's disease, the CDC estimates that 83,494 died,<sup>6</sup> and according to a recent study by the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center in Chicago, "Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are underreported on death certificates and medical records. Death certificates often list the immediate cause of deaths, such as pneumonia, rather than listing Alzheimer's as the underlying cause." The study concludes that Alzheimer's disease may actually be the third-leading cause of death in this country, not the sixth, taking as many lives as heart disease and cancer.<sup>7</sup>

In the 2014 federal budget, spending priorities of the Department of Health and Human Services consume nine pages. The first two pages provide a listing of "Funding Highlights," followed by seven pages of bold-print subtopics giving more information about department priorities. One will find mention of HIV/AIDS in both sections and no mention of Alzheimer's disease in either section.<sup>8</sup>

War on Alzheimer's disease? Apparently, not yet. Readers of this journal need to contact their legislative representatives in Washington, District of Columbia, and

the president to make their voices heard so that federal research spending on Alzheimer's disease becomes a higher priority.

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