

NIDDK Director Emphasizes Research, Education

Dr. Rodgers' priorities include supporting clinical trials and enhancing knowledge dissemination.

BY MIRIAM E. TUCKER
Senior Writer

Dr. Griffin P. Rodgers plans to push forward his agenda of “vigorous, multi-pronged research efforts” in the areas of diabetes, obesity, and endocrinology, even if his budget pushes back a bit.

On April 1, Dr. Rodgers was named the new director of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, overseeing a budget of \$1.8 billion and a staff of 650 scientists and administrators. The Bush administration's proposed fiscal 2008 budget would essentially “flat-line” that amount for the fourth year in a row. At press time, the U.S. House of Representatives had voted to provide a modest \$26-million budget increase for the institute, and the Senate was not expected to take a vote until after its August recess.

Regardless of the final budget allocation, Dr. Rodgers aims to maximize it. “I think federally funded research really plays an indispensable role in [improving the] understanding, prevention, and treatment of disease. And with the budget provided to us, we are actively pursuing a wide range of promising research avenues,” he said in an interview.

Dr. Rodgers outlined five “core principles” that guide his vision for basic, translational, and clinical research in the areas of diabetes, obesity, and other endocrine diseases:

► **Maintain a vigorous, investigator-initiated research portfolio.** “The innovativeness and problem-solving capability of individual investigators are crucial for research progress,” he noted.

Among the diabetes-related priorities are those that will increase understanding of the mechanisms of genes associated with both type 1 and type 2 diabetes, and how the pathways involved might lead to treatment, prevention, or cure. The application of new technologies, such as proteomics and metabolomics, to the study of diabetes and its complications also ranks high on the priority list.

In obesity, NIDDK intends to fund investigator-driven research that illuminates the regulation of appetite and en-

ergy expenditure via hormone signaling, as well as the behavioral and environmental factors contributing to the problem.

► **Support pivotal clinical studies and trials.** Translation of results from two major groundbreaking NIDDK-funded studies—the Diabetes Control and Complications Trial (DCCT) and the Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP)—will remain an institute priority. These ongoing efforts include the DCCT follow-up study, the EDIC (Epidemiology of Diabetes Interventions and Complications) trial, and the DPP Outcomes Study.

Two new studies, both focusing on young people, could have major implications for public health policy and clinical management, respectively.

The HEALTHY trial is a multistate initiative based in 42 middle schools, aimed at determining if changes in food services and physical education classes, along with activities that encourage healthy behaviors, can lower risk factors for type 2 diabetes. Results from that study are expected in 2009.

The other study, called TODAY (Treatment Options for Type 2 Diabetes in Adolescents and Youth), is investigating the best treatments for type 2 diabetes in children. It is still accepting patients. (See box.) Other clinical studies are looking at behavioral approaches to reducing obesity in adults in the general population, and in minority groups in particular.

Strategies to maximize research dollars include the funding of ancillary studies to supplement ongoing large clinical trials, as well as supporting a central repository for biologic materials, derived from those trials, that can be accessed by the broader research community. “We look at these as ways of really extending the investments we've already made in clinical trials. The goal is to derive the maximum benefit from our prior investments,” Dr. Rodgers said.

► **Preserve a stable pool of talented new investigators.** Over the past several years, applications from new investigators for regular research (RO1) grants have received a two-percentage-point advantage in funding consideration, compared with applications from established investigators. And more recently, new investigator applications that just miss the general funding line—commonly called the “payline”—have received second-chance individual consideration via an approach called “special emphasis

funding.” New investigators may also receive short-term support, called R56 awards, that assist them in collecting preliminary data in order to subsequently submit a revised, stronger application for a longer-term regular research grant in the next cycle.

Unfortunately, “we've had to make across-the-board cuts in the size of grants to preserve a payline that has been declining somewhat over the years,” Dr. Rodgers said. Another goal is to “preserve a cadre of new investigators so we really don't lose a generation of investigators during this period of some resource allocation challenges.”

► **Foster exceptional research, training, and mentoring opportunities.** Maintaining a pipeline of NIDDK-focused investi-



Dr. Griffin P. Rodgers became director of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases on April 1.

gators is critically important, Dr. Rodgers said. To that end, competitive institutional research training awards will be given to pediatric endocrinologists involved in diabetes research.

He noted that significant support will also continue at the graduate student and postdoctoral levels. “These programs will help ensure that there will be a cadre of well-trained PhD scientists and physician-scientists specializing in endocrinology and diabetes research,” Dr. Rodgers said.

► **Ensure knowledge dissemination.** Efforts such as the 10-year-old National Diabetes Education Program (cosponsored with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), the National Kidney Disease Education Program, and the Weight-Control Information Network are essential to the institute's mission. “People talk about bench-to-bedside research, but there are data that currently exist that, if they were implemented in practice, would really provide striking benefits to patients on a large scale. A lot of this is a knowledge gap, and that's what we're trying to work with in these education dissemination efforts,” said Dr. Rodgers.

A hematologist by training, Dr. Rodgers has worked at the National Institutes of Health since 1982. He is widely recognized for the development of the first effective therapy for sickle cell anemia, and has performed basic research focused on the understanding of the molecular bases of how drugs induce

Resources for NIDDK Initiatives

► www.niddkrepository.org.

Links to the three repositories through which researchers can access biosamples and data from clinical trials, for example the Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) and the African American Study of Kidney Disease and Hypertension (AASK).

► www.obesityresearch.nih.gov.

Provides information about NIH-supported obesity research and the NIH Obesity Research Task Force. The strategic plan for NIH obesity research also is available through this link.

► www.todaystudy.org. Gives information on the TODAY (Treatment Options for Type 2 Diabetes in Adolescents and Youth) trial, aimed at determining the best treatment for type 2 diabetes in children.

► www.nih.gov/news/pr/aug2006/niddk-28.htm. Links to the press release announcing the launch of the HEALTHY trial, which will determine if changes in middle-school food services and physical education classes—along with activities that encourage healthy behaviors—lower risk factors for type 2 diabetes.

► www.ndep.nih.gov. Links to the Web site of the National Diabetes Education Program. The NDEP, based on the results of several clinical trials, involves public and private initiatives to improve the treatment and outcomes for people with diabetes, promote early diagnosis, and prevent or delay the onset of diabetes.

► www.nkdep.nih.gov. Links to the Web site of the National Kidney Disease Education Program. The NKDEP, based on the results of clinical trials, aims to raise awareness of the seriousness of kidney disease, the importance of testing people at high risk (including those with diabetes, high blood pressure, or a family history of kidney failure), and the availability of treatment to prevent or slow kidney failure.

► <http://win.niddk.nih.gov>. Links to the Web site of the Weight-control Information Network, which provides the general public, health professionals, the media, and Congress with up-to-date, science-based information on weight control, obesity, physical activity, and related nutritional issues.

Diabetes Prevention Initiative Launched

The American Diabetes Association (ADA) has launched CheckUpAmerica, which is aimed at people who are at risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease. The initiative encourages people older than 40 years to have regular checkups and take steps to reduce their risk. The program includes a nationwide radio media tour by Dr. John Buse of the ADA. An online personal assessment tool will be available later this year. For more information, visit www.CheckUpAmerica.org. ■

gamma-globin gene expression. “My own personal work in the area of hematology has provided me with a level of comfort, both in the basic and translational and clinical arenas, that sort of guide the way I think about areas of research that the institute is more generally involved in,” he said in the interview. ■