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Letters to the Editor

The essential role of behavioral research

TO THE EDITOR:

I was appalled to read the comments of Gilbert H. Nussbaum of the Washington University School of Medicine, disparaging the role of behavioral research in the prevention and treatment of disease ("Refocusing NIH Research," October 27). Mr. Nussbaum states, "If the government wants people to stop smoking, then they should just tax the hell out of cigarettes."

Unfortunately, as behavioral research shows, this intuitively appealing solution isn't nearly that simple. Consider the case of alcohol—like cigarettes, another addictive substance whose consumption is a major risk factor for disease and death. Economic studies have shown that, for those heavy drinkers who pose the greatest health risks, the consumption of alcohol is essentially price-inelastic. That is, heavy drinkers will continue to drink, no matter how much alcohol is taxed. Therefore, economic incentives alone will do very little to reduce the health costs of alcohol abuse.

Part of the reason for this state of affairs is that alcohol, like nicotine, is an addictive substance. But while addiction is a physiological process, neurobiology alone cannot help us understand why individuals become addicted in the first place. We need to understand what factors lead people to sample alcohol and tobacco, and what factors lead them to continue to dose until the addictive cycle of tolerance and withdrawal takes hold. And once the addictive cycle is broken, we need to know how individuals can be helped to stay away from these substances. These are all problems for psychosocial research.

Psychosocial research plays an important role elsewhere in health, too, from obesity and heart disease to AIDS and violence—never mind *mental* health problems such as de-

Continued on Following Page

Continued From Preceding Page
pression and schizophrenia, where its relevance should be obvious. As Alan G. Kraut, executive director of the American Psychological Society, noted in the very same issue of *The Chronicle* ("Why NIH Must Accept Behavioral Scientists as Full Partners," Opinion), it is now widely appreciated that behavioral factors account for an extremely large portion of disease and death in this country.

With all due respect for the advances being made in genetics and other subfields of biology, the fact remains that the individual's behavior is powerfully influenced by the social environment, as mediated by internal psychological processes. We will never be able to change people's health-related behaviors unless we understand the psychological and social processes that lie at their core.

Basic and applied psychosocial research, including behavioral research with non-human animals, is essential to preventing illness and promoting health. It deserves more respect, and more support, than it has received to date from many of our colleagues in the biological sciences.

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