



ACNP President's Letter 2016
Alan Frazer, Ph.D.

I am honored to serve as the President of the ACNP. The ACNP was organized over 50 years ago, during the wave of excitement that accompanied the discovery of drugs that dramatically improved the treatment of psychiatric illnesses. It is worth remembering that at the foundation of the College was the idea that patients with such illnesses would benefit from the results of interactions among scientists in academia, the pharmaceutical industry and government with their combined expertise in either pre-clinical and/or clinical studies. The ACNP, then, was “translational” even before the term was applied to biomedical research. In addition to its scientific endeavors, the College would also strive to increase government support for research important to these disorders as well as contribute to the public discourse around issues of relevance for the discipline of neuropsychopharmacology, e.g., informed consent with psychiatric patients, the use of animals in biomedical research, safety of psychotherapeutic treatments.

As might be expected, the questions we are asking now are more sophisticated and nuanced than those we asked 50 years ago. Further, the techniques that we have at our disposal, many of which could not even be imagined in 1961, allow us to ask and answer questions that we could not think of then. The White House Brain Initiative, currently underway, will elicit innovative technical developments, eventually enabling us to study and understand brain function in ways that are not possible even today. Nevertheless, the “translatable” impact of all these developments for our patients, while substantial in many ways has been modest in others. Societal influences play a major role in how well our research is supported and the robustness of that support dramatically impacts the pace of new developments. Unfortunately, despite the many advances in medicine in general and in our field in particular, there are negative influences on research. Those negative influences are fueled by the fact that many in the general population have little understanding of how science works, leading to indifference at best and an anti-science bias at worst. A lack of understanding or appreciation of science also exists for decision makers -- our political leaders and the press. Currently, balanced budgets are of paramount importance for some of our political leaders even if at the expense of curtailing or eliminating many crucial research initiatives. The pharmaceutical industry is perceived as a problem, rather than being part of the solution in developing better treatments. Others view animals as having the same “rights” as humans and state that because of this it is immoral to use them for research purposes. And there is the still-prevailing, although hopefully lessened, stigma of mental illness. As a College of scientists, these are not issues directly addressed by our research efforts.

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Nevertheless, these issues affect our College and our colleagues and our ability to carry out research so as to help our patients. Accordingly, as educators, it is appropriate that our College attempts to address some of these issues and others with societal impact in ways that are consistent with our mission, with the size of our organization and, most importantly, with the expertise contained within our College. For example, our Liaison Committee, both on its own and in conjunction with other organizations, visits Capitol Hill periodically to discuss a variety of issues with members of Congress and their staff. Not surprisingly, these visits often focus on the need for more funding for biomedical research in general or for psychiatric illnesses in particular. I am proud that the ACNP engages in this activity, and the high quality and accomplishments of our members provides the credibility that enables our message to be heard. During such visits, though, it should be possible to educate further the members of Congress about how science works, the importance of animals in biomedical research, and specific issues of paramount importance for our patients such as the delivery of health services. Representing the needs of our patient advocacy organizations can lead to their promoting our research, which will be a win/win situation.

Like many members of the College, I am a basic scientist, and I am increasingly concerned about a continuing effort by a number of large, well-financed groups with a mission to restrict, and ultimately end, the use of animals in biomedical research. I give credit to veterinarians and regulatory agencies whose activities have led to the better treatment of animals used in research, including better housing conditions. Also, it is appropriate for all of us to take into consideration how to refine our experimental protocols and when possible to replace animals with alternative procedures so as to reduce the number of animals used. But we must always remember that biomedical research with animals alleviates pain, suffering and death - not only in humans but also in animals. Animals such as chimpanzees can be susceptible to the same diseases that humans are, Ebola being an example. Captive chimpanzees have been added to the "endangered" list and research with animals on this list is forbidden. There is practically unanimous agreement among experts that chimpanzees are essential in certain studies and, ironically, for developing an effective Ebola vaccine for wild populations. Ebola has wiped out almost one-third of the world's chimpanzees (and gorillas) over the last 20 years or so. Before an Ebola vaccine can be administered to chimpanzees in the wild, it must be tested first on captive chimpanzees. This may no longer be possible. So recently developed Ebola vaccines, tested extensively in animals, are likely to be effective in humans but may not be given to chimpanzees in the wild, unless the rules are changed.

The animal "rights" movement has targeted members of the ACNP for the research they carry out. We have responded to such attacks with letters to the appropriate

authorities clarifying the activities of our members. But we need to do more and become proactive and not just reactive. All our members know that our effective treatments for ADHD, major depressive disorder, schizophrenia, etc., as imperfect as they may be, resulted both from basic research being carried out in animals as well as studies in animals to test safety. And we will not improve our treatments without animal research. The facts are on our side. But again as educators, we need to tell them – to schoolchildren, teenagers, adults, politicians, and the press. As President, I will charge the ACNP and its members to become more involved in such activities, in collaboration with other appropriate societies, and hope that this has some positive effects.

We do address the issue of the stigma of mental illness in a variety of ways. An important contribution that we can make as scientists is the identification of biomarkers for psychiatric illnesses. Doing so would be transformative in moving psychiatric illnesses further into the general medical domain where biological alterations found in patients help to make or to confirm diagnoses and/or to direct treatment. Identification of biomarkers remains a “holy grail” for our research efforts, but we have not found one. In addition to looking for biomarkers directly, the research of many of our members using “endophenotypes” and their use of Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) to stratify patients should assist in the search for new treatments as well as for biomarkers.

In these exciting, but also challenging, times in biomedical science, where is the ACNP heading? In my opinion, it has been moving in the right direction and it will be quite easy for me to follow the path laid down by recent Presidents such as David Rubinow, Eric Nestler, John Krystal, David Lewis, Peter Kalivas, and Raquel Gur. Their initiatives to increase the number of younger members, women members, and underrepresented minority members in the ACNP have borne fruit and I will do everything possible to see that those important initiatives continue. Just as important as having these new members in the College is making opportunities for them to be active in the College, including presentations on our panels, membership on committees and participating in leadership- and this is occurring also. One consequence of streamlining the categories of membership about five years ago was a substantial increase in the number of members who are not from North America – both associate and full members. This diversity in our membership is highly desirable given the international flavor of research; one goal of mine will be to increase the visibility of these members in the College. A vibrant organization such as the ACNP needs a solid financial footing to be effective – fortunately, our financial situation is quite good due primarily to the efforts of our Treasurer, David Kupfer, our Executive Director, Ronnie Wilkins, and our Deputy Director, Sarah Timm

I am fortunate to be taking over the Presidency in the best of times – with the College having an outstanding diverse group of talented, dedicated investigators, a superb support staff, fiscal stability, and the ongoing guidance from very wise past presidents. In light of these considerations, even I should not be able to mess things up too badly!