
The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is a division of USA's Office of Portfolio Analysis and Strategic Initiatives. The NIH is the Department of Health and Human Service’s medical research agency. The aim of the NIH is to improve health and save lives through medical discoveries. The roadmap website for the NIH commenced after the Director of the NIH, Elias A. Zerhouni, MD, convened a series of meetings in May 2002 to chart a ‘roadmap’ for medical research in the twenty-first century. The purpose was to identify major opportunities and gaps in biomedical research that no single institute could tackle alone. The NIH felt the need to address these issues to be the biggest influence on the progress of medical research. The questions raised at the meetings were ‘What are today’s scientific challenges?’, ‘What are the roadblocks to progress?’, ‘What do we need to do to overcome roadblocks?’ and ‘What can’t be accomplished by any single institute – but is the responsibility of the NIH as a whole?’ The roadmap website is the public face of these concepts to be investigated.

The opening page of the website has links to research, research opportunities and funding. The major titles are ‘New Pathways of Discovery’, ‘Research Teams of the Future’ and ‘Re-engineering the Clinical Research Enterprise’. Each link provides a description of the title and sublinks such as funding opportunities, funded research and group meetings.

Nanomedicine was listed as one of the ‘New Pathways of Discovery’. From this link I learnt about the premise of nanotechnology, which examines the interactions between molecules sized in the range of $10^{-9}$ of a metre. Unfortunately, because I have just struggled through an abdomen full of dense adhesions, no mention was made of molecular scissors for adhesions. Use of the search function for ‘adhesions’ led me to a dialogue of tissue engineering research and to a list of recipients of the NIH Directors Pioneer Awards, which was not particularly helpful to me. There was the occasional link that flashed ‘You are not authorized to view this page’ that led me to wonder if I was threatening the USA’s national security with my curiosity! On the whole the links are well organized and easy to follow and access. The difficulty lies in getting bogged down and lost in the detail. Through ‘Research Teams of the Future’ I learnt about high-risk research – Director of the NIH provides funds to those with unique perspectives and abilities. The funds are awarded to those with creative ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking to allow them to pursue exciting and innovative ideas in biomedical research.

Through the website you can learn about epigenomics, bioinformatics, computational biology, molecular libraries, proteomics, cheminformatics and, of course, nanotechnology.

What is impressive about the NIH roadmap is the scale of research conducted and the science behind the organization of that research. To illustrate the scale in terms of financial funding the Australia’s National Health and Medical Research Council has an annual funding budget for research of $A630m compared with the NIH’s $US28bn for 2007.

Researchers, those involved in research planning and those curious about what is at the forefront of medical research would find the site worth visiting. Although the NIH have not placed a cure for adhesions on top of the list of medical research priorities, they have initiated a ‘roadmap’ for medical research to plan and amalgamate current knowledge and deficits in biomedical research to chart the way forward in the twenty-first century.

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