# National Mental Health Director Defends Its Conflict of Interest Policy

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The director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Thomas Insel, MD, defended the agency against criticism it hasn't done enough to combat conflicts of interest in researchers receiving NIMH funding. Insel posted the comments on his blog January 22.

The flurry of charges against the NIMH during the past three years was sparked largely by U.S. Senator Charles Grassley (R–Iowa), who led an investigation into the pharmaceutical industry's influence over mental health researchers. The findings singled out several influential mental health researchers who received hundreds of thousands of dollars from pharmaceutical companies for tasks such as consulting work and education of psychiatrists, while simultaneously receiving government grants to study the very drugs those same companies make.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH), of which the NIMH is a part, has conflict of interest rules that researchers receiving its funding are supposed to follow. But many researchers, and the universities who employ them, have failed to properly disclose to the NIMH the level of pharmaceutical funding they received on drug studies. Grassley and others have argued that the NIMH and other NIH institutes haven't done enough to seek out and discipline researchers who have conflicts of interest.

In his blog, Insel claims this isn't true. "Unfortunately, some public databases have not been updated to reflect [changes in NIMH conflict of interest policy and practice], leading to the mistaken impression that no changes had been made at NIMH," writes Insel.

"In fact, a new process began in the summer of 2008, when NIMH sent a letter to every principal investigator about the requirements for disclosure and implemented an aggressive approach to identify and prevent potential conflicts in our portfolio. While some applicants and grantees have been frustrated, I see this extra scrutiny as a necessary step to reforming a system that has lost public trust."

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