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US draws up plans to tackle autism

Emily Singer, Washington

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is preparing a research plan for autism — and hopes to cut the condition's prevalence in the United States by a quarter by 2013.

The NIH autism 'roadmap', revealed on 19 November at a planning meeting of researchers and autism activists in Washington DC, will aim to identify the genetic, environmental and neurological factors behind the disorder. It represents the biomedical research agency's first concerted push to tackle the condition, which afflicts up to 1 in 200 people in the United States.

Requested by the Congress last year, the roadmap was drawn up by the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee, a group of scientists, autism advocates and public-health experts. It may form the basis of future budget requests from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), which will lead its implementation.

By setting specific benchmarks for treating the disorder, the plan is something of a departure for the NIH, reflecting the results-oriented approach advocated by its director, Elias Zerhouni (see *Nature* 425, 438; 2003). The main scientific aspects of the roadmap include building a database of genes potentially linked to autism, and a series of clinical trials to determine the effectiveness of various early treatments for the condition. But the plan also sets what it calls a "high-risk" goal of reducing incidence of the disorder by 25% within ten years.

Researchers haven't tackled these problems before, partly because so little is understood about the mechanisms behind autism. There is currently no biological diagnosis for the disorder. "We have no genes, no circuits, no workable animal models, so we don't have the tools to develop new treatments," says NIMH director Thomas Insel. "It's a striking contrast to where we are with the rest of medicine. We are where we were eight years ago with Alzheimer's disease or 20 years ago with Huntington's."

At this point, NIH officials don't know how much money will be available to support the initiative. But some of the work will be done at eight autism research centres, established last year by the NIH, with a total budget of \$65 million over five years.

The NIH and the National Alliance for Autism Research, an advocacy group based in Princeton, New Jersey, are already supporting a \$4.5-million project to coordinate the search for autism-related genes. Now advocacy groups hope that the roadmap will form the basis of a larger, publicly supported investigation of the condition.

"It's gratifying to see the government addressing it at such a high level and with such high priority," says Lee Grossman, chairman of the Autism Society of America, an advocacy group based in Bethesda, Maryland. "It's what we've been asking for for decades."