DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES Public Health Service

National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, MD 20892

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National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
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August 16, 2001

Matthew Cartter, M.D., M.P.H.
President
Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists
2872 Woodcock Boulevard, Suite 303
Atlanta, GA 30341-4015

Dear Dr. Cartter:

I am responding to your July 20 letter to NIH Director Dr. Ruth Kirschstein regarding your organization's recent position statement concerning federal funding support for West Nile virus and, in particular, your desire for the NIH to become involved in such efforts. Because the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), one of the Institutes that comprise the NIH, spearheads the agency's research on this virus, your letter was referred to my office for reply.

We would be delighted to collaborate with CSTE and others on issues related to West Nile. The NIAID already partners with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other organizations on a host of federally-supported West Nile activities. In fact, we coordinate our West Nile research portfolio with the CDC and interact with our counterparts there on a regular basis.

In that regard, I would also like to correct what appears to be a misperception that the NIH does not support West Nile research activities. The NIAID actively supports a number of West Nile research efforts, which are summarized in the attached document. As you know, the NIH mission is to uncover new knowledge that will lead to better health for everyone. The NIH works toward that mission by: conducting research in its own laboratories; supporting the research of non-Federal scientists in universities, medical schools, hospitals, and research institutions throughout the country and abroad; helping in the training of research investigators; and fostering communication of medical and health sciences information. To this end, West Nile is a high priority research area for the NIH and I can assure you that related proposals submitted for grant or contract support are given every consideration. If you are interested in learning more about NIH's funding support process, you may want to visit the following website: http://grants.nih.gov/grants/index.cfm

Dr. James Meegan is NIAID's Program Officer responsible for West Nile activities and he would be pleased to work with CSTE; he can be reached on (301) 496-7453 or by e-mail at jm75v@nih.gov. We look forward to working with you, and Jim will expect to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Carole Heilman, Ph.D.
Director, Division of Microbiology
and Infectious Diseases
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Enclosure

cc: Dr. James Meegan

NIH West Nile Virus Research Activities -- 2001

The NIH is spending approximately $8 million annually for grants to scientific centers for programs studying West Nile and related viruses. Research is underway to develop a vaccine, antiviral medicines and new diagnostic assays. Additionally, basic research programs are studying the virus itself, the disease in humans and animals, and maintenance of the virus in nature. Knowledge of these principles is essential in planning strategies to prevent, treat, and eventually control this disease.

In brief, these areas of research include:

- **Research to prevent and control spread of the disease.** Since we do not now know the eventual public health impact of West Nile, it is considered prudent to start developmental research on a vaccine for humans. The NIH recently funded studies to explore the possibility of producing a vaccine against West Nile. Initial results with this research, which uses the existing yellow fever vaccine (also a related flavivirus) as a vectoring backbone to deliver West Nile virus antigens, have been very encouraging.
- **Research to treat the disease with antiviral drugs.** The NIH has funded investigators to establish a system to screen chemical compounds for possible antiviral activity against West Nile virus. Any promising antiviral drug candidates will be tested in a newly developed animal model system to evaluate safety and efficacy before moving on to possible human trials.
- **Research to improve rapid diagnosis.** This effort supports research to allow rapid detection of West Nile in samples from humans, other animals or vectoring mosquitoes. This research occurs mainly at small biotechnology companies who are attempting to develop new, commercially available diagnostic assays.
- **Research on the virus itself, on the disease in humans, and on its maintenance in nature.** Factors influencing the pattern of emergence and distribution of West Nile include those associated with the virus itself, the agent's hosts and vectors, and the environment in which agent and host interact. However, the specific factors contributing to emergence of West Nile are poorly understood. Nonetheless, knowledge of these principles is essential in planning strategies to prevent, treat, and control this disease. The overall objective of this basic research is to develop the knowledge and public health tools needed for the U.S. to combat West Nile.