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Contact: Larry Thompson

NHGRI

(301) 402-0911

thompsl@mail.nih.gov

Francis S. Collins to Step Down As Director of National Human Genome Research Institute

Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D., the director of the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), today announced his intention to step down on August 1 to explore writing projects and other professional opportunities.

Dr. Collins, 58, a physician-geneticist, has served as NHGRI's director since April 1993. He led the Human Genome Project (HGP) to its successful conclusion in 2003, and subsequently initiated and managed a wide range of projects that built upon the foundation laid by the sequencing of the human genome. Following the precedent set by the HGP under Dr. Collins' leadership, these projects have made their data rapidly and freely available to the worldwide scientific community. Collectively, these projects and their data have transformed biomedical research and empowered researchers all around the world.

"The key to success is having wonderful scientific opportunities and stellar colleagues with whom to work. That has been my great privilege here at NIH, an institution that stands for the very best in biomedical research," Dr. Collins said. "Many challenges lie ahead as genomics increasingly becomes a leading force in medicine, and I leave my position supremely confident that NHGRI and NIH will continue to achieve notable success in meeting them."

"Francis has provided 15 years of outstanding leadership to NHGRI and has been a trailblazer in the scientific community at large," NIH Director Elias A. Zerhouni, M.D., said. "His contributions to the world of genomics and medicine have been enormous. He has been a tremendous colleague, friend, and brilliant visionary. I know that he will continue to make groundbreaking advances in biomedical research. My colleagues and I have had a supreme good fortune of working with Francis over the years, we are all sorry to see him leave NIH, and wish him every success in his new endeavors."

In addition to his scientific leadership and long list of contributions to basic genetic research, Dr. Collins is known for his close attention to the ethical, legal and

social implications of genome research. He has been a strong advocate for protecting the privacy of genetic information and has been recognized for his leadership in making the case for the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008. The act, which became law last week nearly 13 years after it was first introduced in Congress, protects Americans from discrimination in health insurance and employment based on their genetic information.

Dr. Collins explained that his decision to step down as leader of NHGRI came after much personal deliberation. “My decision was driven by a desire for an interval of time dedicated to writing, reflection and exploration of other professional opportunities in the public or private sectors,” he said. “The demands and responsibilities of directing an NIH institute do not allow the time commitment necessary for this. In addition, I may need greater latitude than my current position allows to pursue other potential positions of service without encountering any possible conflicts of interest, whether real or perceived.”

Dr. Zerhouni also announced that Alan E. Guttmacher, M.D., the current deputy director of NHGRI, will be appointed acting director of NHGRI on August 1. “Dr. Guttmacher is a highly regarded pediatric geneticist who has played a significant leadership role at NHGRI over the past six years. His appointment as acting director of NHGRI will assure a seamless transition,” said Dr. Zerhouni, adding that a formal search process for a permanent NHGRI director will get underway shortly.

In addition to his leadership of the public effort to sequence the human genome, Dr. Collins initiated and guided a wide range of follow-up projects in large-scale genomics: the International HapMap Project; the Encyclopedia of DNA Elements; the Knockout Mouse Project; the Mammalian Gene Collection; The Cancer Genome Atlas, which is a joint effort with the National Cancer Institute; and the Molecular Libraries Initiative and the Human Microbiome Project, both of which are part of the NIH Roadmap for Biomedical Research. He also played a leading role in applying the tools of genomics to understanding the risk factors for common diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, various types of cancer and mental illness. This work includes bold projects such as the Genetic Association Information Network and the Genes, Environment and Health Initiative.

Dr. Collins also founded an intramural program in genomics at NIH in 1993. NHGRI’s Division of Intramural Research, which encompasses cutting edge research from basic science to clinical investigation, has emerged as one of the most successful research organizations in this rapidly moving and highly competitive field.

As a scientist, Dr. Collins has been a pioneer in the development of innovative genetic tools and the use of such tools to study the genetic factors that contribute to both rare and common human diseases. Throughout his career, his teams have made a number of important discoveries, including the genes for cystic fibrosis, neurofibromatosis, a common type of adult leukemia and Huntington’s disease.

Recently, his laboratory in NHGRI's intramural program has uncovered striking new insights into the cause, diagnosis and treatment of type 2 diabetes and Hutchinson-Gilford progeria, which is a rare disorder that causes a dramatic form of premature aging. To provide continuity for these ongoing projects and to allow him to continue to provide mentorship for trainees, Dr. Collins indicated he will remain deeply involved in his lab's work after August 1 by serving as a part-time, unpaid "special volunteer" at NIH. The Collins lab will be formally supervised by Lawrence Brody, Ph.D., a senior investigator in the NHGRI Genome Technology Branch.

Dr. Collins received a B.S. from the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.; a Ph.D. in physical chemistry from Yale University, New Haven, Conn.; and an M.D. from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Following a fellowship in human genetics at Yale, Dr. Collins joined the faculty of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he remained until becoming NHGRI director in 1993.

For more biographical information on Dr. Collins, go to <http://www.genome.gov/10000779>. For more biographical information on Dr. Guttmacher, go to <http://www.genome.gov/10005495>.

To download a high-resolution photograph of Dr. Collins, go to <http://www.genome.gov/pressDisplay.cfm?photoID=110>. To download a high-resolution photograph of Dr. Guttmacher, go to <http://www.genome.gov/pressDisplay.cfm?photoID=35>.

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NHGRI is one of the 27 institutes and centers at the NIH. The NHGRI Division of Intramural Research develops and implements technology to understand, diagnose and treat genomic and genetic diseases. The NHGRI Division of Extramural Research supports grants for research and for training and career development at sites nationwide. Additional information about NHGRI can be found at its Web site, www.genome.gov.

The National Institutes of Health — "The Nation's Medical Research Agency" — includes 27 institutes and centers, and is a component of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is the primary federal agency for conducting and supporting basic, clinical and translational medical research, and it investigates the causes, treatments and cures for both common and rare diseases. For more, visit www.nih.gov.