



The National Institute on Aging: *A Catalyst for Global Aging Research*

The National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) at the United States Department of Health and Human Services, leads the Federal research effort to increase our understanding of the nature and implications of aging and to find ways to extend the healthy, active years of life.

Established in 1974, NIA's mission is to improve the health and well-being of older people through research by:

- Supporting and conducting high-quality research on aging processes, age-related diseases, and special problems and needs of the aged
- Training and developing highly skilled research scientists from all population groups
- Developing and maintaining state-of-the-art resources to accelerate research progress
- Disseminating information and communicating with the public and interested groups on health and research advances and on new directions for research.

NIA sponsors research in several broad categories: the behavioral and social aspects of aging, the biology of aging, geriatrics and clinical gerontology, neuroscience and neuropsychology, and health disparities. This is accomplished in two ways. The Institute funds research and training at universities, medical centers, and other research organizations throughout the U.S. and abroad. NIA also is the home of laboratory and clinical research facilities in Baltimore and Bethesda, Maryland. There, NIA's multidisciplinary scientists seek to characterize normal aging and uncover new knowledge about age-related diseases, including Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, stroke, atherosclerosis, osteoarthritis, diabetes, and cancer.

Complementing its scientific programs, NIA disseminates information about aging-related topics and research to the general public, policymakers, health professionals, the media, and other audiences. The Institute reaches out to the general public through its website (www.nia.nih.gov) and two clearinghouses—the NIA Information Center and the Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center.

NIA is directed by Dr. Richard J. Hodes, who

welcomed the Summit on Global Aging's discussion of these important population trends and the focus on research. "This Summit brings wider attention to the value of research in addressing the accelerated aging of individuals and societies," he stated. "The NIA has provided leadership in establishing an infrastructure for global research on population aging, and I hope today's discussion stimulates further collaboration."

Dr. Richard Suzman directs NIA's Behavioral and Social Research Program, which led NIA's collaboration with the State Department on the Summit. "The extraordinary achievement of increased life expectancy in the past century, along with reductions in the birth rate, brings us to an unprecedented challenge—how to provide for the added years of life," he states. "There is a narrow window for effective action on the demographic and economic factors affecting the future, and biomedical and socio-behavioral research will be critical components in finding ways to reduce disease and prevent disability with age."

NIA in the Global Aging Arena

Unprecedented societal changes are occurring worldwide as fertility and mortality rates decline in most countries and as populations age. These changes affect individuals, families, governments, and private-sector organizations as they grapple with questions related to health care, housing, social security, work and retirement, caregiving, and the burden of disease and disability.

NIA has responded to these dramatic population shifts by catalyzing cross-national research, sponsoring collaborative international projects, and disseminating findings about aging-related conditions and concerns affecting people worldwide.

Initiatives sponsored by NIA's Behavioral and Social Research Program focus on understanding the demography and economics of aging and the patterns and consequences of population aging worldwide. Through that program and other initiatives, in both the United States and abroad, NIA also seeks to understand better the genetic, biological, and environmental underpinnings of age-related change and specific diseases associated with growing older, such as Alzheimer's disease.

Studies and initiatives in the international arena include:

■ **The Health and Retirement Study (HRS)—A Model for Other Countries:** The NIA-sponsored HRS, begun in 1990, has painted a detailed picture of older adults' health, work and retirement, income and wealth, and family characteristics and intergenerational transfers. In recent years, other nations have used the HRS—a biennial survey of more than 20,000 Americans over age 50—as a model for planning similar large-scale, longitudinal studies of their own populations. Several studies—the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA); the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE); the Mexican Health and Aging Study (MHAS); and the Korean Longitudinal Study of Aging—have been established in collaboration with NIA. Plans for comparable surveys in Japan, Ireland, and Thailand are underway, while China and India are planning panel studies of health and retirement. The data gathered from the HRS and these parallel studies allow for informative comparisons of the impact of lifestyles, interventions, and policies on trends in aging and retirement in these countries.

■ **Cross-National Databases and International Studies:** NIA co-funds more than two dozen cross-national aging-related datasets and single-country studies of aging. These studies include, for example, the International Database on Aging, involving 227 countries; the International Network for the Demographic Evaluation of Populations and Their Health (INDEPTH), involving 19 developing nations; the Human Mortality Database, involving 28 countries; the World Health Organization (WHO) Study on Global Ageing and Adult Health (SAGE); the Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey; the Longitudinal Study of Aging Danish Twins; SHARE; ELSA; and MHAS.

■ **NIA Demography Centers:** NIA promotes health, economic, and demographic research on population aging by funding 13 NIA Demography Centers located at U.S. universities and research organizations. These multi-faceted centers are charged with maintaining and improving information available to the public and policymakers addressing population aging issues, including at the global level. The NIA Demography Centers train new researchers, develop and share data resources and resource methodologies, facilitate multidisciplinary national and international collaboration, and encourage investigators to engage in aging-related research and widespread dissemination of research findings.

■ **Global Burden of Disease:** NIA supports, in collaboration with the WHO and others, the 2006 Global Burden of Disease and Risk Factors initiative, which

is strengthening the methodological and empirical basis for undertaking comparative assessments of health problems and their determinants and consequences in aging populations worldwide. By looking at the combined toll of death and disability within populations and by providing a way to compare patterns among populations, this study elucidates the burden on individuals, countries, and economies around the globe.

■ **International Genetics Research:** NIA sponsors research conducted internationally to understand better the genetic causes of aging-related diseases such as dementia. A recently reported study, conducted collaboratively by 14 institutions in North America, Europe, and Asia, identified variations of the SORL1 gene that may factor in the development of late onset Alzheimer's disease. NIA, the National Human Genome Research Institute of NIH, and 18 other international public and private organizations supported the effort, which examined genetic data from more than 6,000 individuals.

■ **International Scientist Training:** NIA and the John E. Fogarty International Center, also part of NIH, sponsor training for researchers worldwide. The Institute actively participates in the NIH Visiting Fellowship Program, in which advanced postdoctoral researchers can gain research experience at NIH laboratories, and this year is inviting junior researchers from low- or middle-income countries to attend NIA's Summer Institute. NIA further supports training of international researchers through the RAND annual Summer Institute.

■ **Information Dissemination:** NIA disseminates aging-related research findings and commissions publications addressing national and international aging-related issues. The Institute supported the publication of *Why Population Aging Matters: A Global Perspective* (published in March 2007 by NIA and the U.S. Department of State) as background for the March 2007 Summit on Global Aging. It also supported development and production of reports such as *An Aging World: 2001* (U.S. Census Bureau); *Aging in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recommendations for Furthering Research* (National Academies Press); and *Living Arrangements of Older Persons Around the World* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division).

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