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The NIH Story

by Sara Phang

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) traces its beginnings to 1887, when a one-room laboratory was founded on Staten Island in New York. Today, the NIH campus in Bethesda has 75 buildings that house 18 national institutes plus 6 related centers with more than 16,000 scientists, physicians, other health professionals, and administrative and support personnel. NIH also funds research throughout the country, led by more than 50,000 researchers.

NIH serves the nation by enabling advances in biological science and medicine, and the local community by disseminating medical information and providing numerous jobs, internships for students, and volunteer opportunities. NIH has put Bethesda on the international map, since scientists from all over the world come here to do research.

In September, NIH dedicated its new hospital, the Mark O. Hatfield Clinical Research Center. At the dedication ceremony, an NIH patient spoke about her participation in a cancer clinical trial at NIH. She called the Center “The House of Hope.”

The Beginnings

NIH’s sprawling complex developed from the Hygienic Laboratory established in 1887 by the Marine Hospital Service (MHS). The MHS provided medical care for merchant seamen and the U.S. Navy.

In the late 19th century the MHS became responsible for controlling infectious diseases such as cholera and yellow fever. The Staten Island laboratory focused on infectious diseases in immigrants.

The Hygienic Laboratory moved to Washington, D.C., in 1891. Congress allotted \$35,000 in 1901 for the construction of a larger laboratory on five acres at 25th and E Streets, N.W. In 1902, the MHS was reorganized and named the Public Health and Marine Hospital Service. It continued to focus on contagious diseases. Renamed the Public Health Service in 1912, it also began to study non-infectious disease. With the near elimination of major infectious diseases, the focus from the 1930’s onward became chronic degenerative diseases such as heart disease and cancer.

In 1930, Congress changed the name of the Hygienic Laboratory to the National Institute of Health. The word “Institute” was not yet plural. The National Cancer Institute (NCI) was created in 1937. The 1930’s saw the growth of government funding to support fundamental biological and medical research, a priority of the U.S. scientific budget ever since.

The Wilson Family’s Donation

In 1938, NIH moved to its Bethesda location. Three years earlier, Mr. and Mrs. Luke I. Wilson had donated 65 acres of their estate “Tree Tops” for the use of the NIH.

Mr. Wilson was a retired Chicago clothier with extensive European business ties. His original bequest was intended for an educational center for international peace, but it was allotted to the Public Health Service. Construction of NIH buildings, six Georgian-style brick buildings, began in 1938.

Mrs. Wilson gave an additional 25.1 acres in 1938 and 11.6 acres in 1940. She made a final gift of land in 1942, bringing the total to 92 acres. NIH bought an additional 115.8 acres from the Town & Country Golf Club and 50.2 acres from the Sisters of the Visitation in 1949. The total campus now covers over 300 acres.

Broadening Research

During the Second World War, the NIH focused almost entirely on war-related medical problems, such as the medical fitness of recruits and the safety of munitions workers. NIH also funded research into vaccines and drugs for tropical diseases faced by U.S. soldiers in the South Pacific.

The plural title, National Institutes of Health, was created in 1948. In the postwar period, research surged ahead, with fundamental discoveries such as the structure of the genetic code, stimulating the development of whole new areas of biological research. Many new institutes supporting research on mental health, heart disease, and other chronic medical disorders were created.

NIH emphasizes cooperation between laboratory research and patient care. The Warren Grant Magnuson Clinical Center, a clinical research hospital, opened in 1953. New treatments and procedures are tested in clinical trials at the Center. The Clinical Center has treated more than 350,000 participants in clinical studies and is connected to the new Hatfield Center.

New Clinical Research Center Opens

On Wednesday, September 22, 2004, the National Institutes of Health opened the new Mark O. Hatfield Clinical Research Center, named for the former senator. The most striking addition to the NIH campus in over 50 years, the new hospital offers opportunities for clinical research and offers patients the opportunity to receive cutting-edge therapies as participants in clinical studies.

The Hatfield Center features a unique multi-story, glass-enclosed atrium, the Science Court, a central focal point for the hospital community. The Science Court will feature gardens of medicinal plants, developed in coordination with the U.S. Botanic Garden; these plants have been used for medicine in many cultures for thousands of years. The Science Court contains a "meditation alley" and a sculptural pool and waterfall, inspired by the healing pool of Bethesda in the Gospel of John, designed by artists Gene and Susan Flores.

Two landscaped courtyards in the Hatfield Center patient wings provide peaceful, soothing, and private green spaces for patients and their families to relax in, helping to promote their recovery. The Hatfield Center will open with about 240 inpatient beds and 80 day-hospital stations.

Patients will move into the hospital in December. Patients will have larger rooms than in the old Center, with temperature controls and energy-conserving light sensors, flat-screen TVs, and a “kitchen” space for each patient. For the on-call physicians, each patient care unit will have a dedicated on-call room furnished with a bed, a desk, and a lamp, so that the physician can catch a few hours of sleep without using empty patient rooms.

Annually, more than 1,000 clinical studies are conducted at NIH. The Hatfield Center’s organization contains highly flexible space so that laboratories can become offices and vice versa. All air comes in at one end of the building and out at the other without being recycled, a “single-pass air” system intended to keep the air clean.

The National Library of Medicine

The National Library of Medicine, one of the nation’s oldest public health agencies, is the nation’s largest research library devoted to a single scientific and professional field. It makes medical information available to the public through the searchable database MEDLINE at www.nlm.nih.gov. MEDLINE enables the user to find the most current research articles on a desired medical topic.

MedlinePlus is a database created to help the public find information on medical and health topics. Topics are frequently updated and contain the latest relevant findings. MedlinePlus also features a database of drug information, a medical encyclopedia, and a medical dictionary.

Medicine for the Public Lecture Series

Each fall, lectures on cutting-edge scientific and medical topics are free and open to the public. They are held at 7 p.m. on Tuesdays at the Masur Auditorium of the Clinical Center Building (Building 10).

Call (301) 496-2563 for information on specific topics and speakers. Topics for fall 2004 have focused on dietary supplements and research on how to prevent reading failure in children. A late October lecture is titled “The Biomechanics of Human Movement: Could Leonardo da Vinci Fly?”

Volunteer at NIH

Children and their families travel to NIH for the latest advances in medical treatments. The Children’s Inn at NIH provides a more homelike setting for the Clinical Center’s young patients and their families.

The Children’s Inn welcomes volunteers as welcome desk staff, grocery run drivers, gardeners, clerical assistants, computer room staff, interpreters, and recreational assistants. If you are interested in volunteering on a regular basis, please contact Director of Volunteers Laura King (king@box-l.nih.gov) at 301-451-9454 or fill out a Volunteer Service Application, at the link at www.childrensinn.org/about/volunteer.shtml

The NIH also seeks volunteers to assist health care specialists. Training is provided.