This compilation is prompted by press discussion of charges made by the Traditional Values Coalition (TVC) that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) wasted American taxpayer dollars funding bizarre research, including research carried out by “Chinese scientists working at Chinese institutions.” The charges coincided with July debate over whether or not to raise the U.S. debt ceiling. TVC said that the NIH had made $30 million in grants to Chinese researchers over the past two and a half years. TVC President Andrea Lafferty said, “It is simply unacceptable for the NIH to pay Chinese researchers to study acupuncture, or fund international research, when we are struggling to pay our own debts.” TVC wants a moratorium on NIH grants “while a special prosecutor or other impartial investigator conducts a full review of the NIH budget.”

A review of current NIH grants suggests that the agency is funding research into pressing public health issues and that this research is yielding important insights. TVC argues that medical research must benefit the American taxpayer. This research generally does this. How acupuncture “works,” for example, is important not just to those utilizing the practice in the United States, but for what it may reveal about our bodies sense and communicate pain. Since Americans are potentially vulnerable to mosquito-borne diseases, they benefit when scientists gain a sharper understanding of how the insecticides used to control mosquitos become less effective. Knowing how China’s social and cultural contexts affect the health and well-being of its elderly may help those concerned about improving the lives of America’s retirees. In many instances, work is carried out with American scholars and institutions and the results are published in American scientific journals.

TVC paid particular attention to HIV/AIDS-related research and to projects involving reproductive health. Its opposition to some HIV/AIDS research stems from a belief that making sex work or intravenous drug use less risky facilitates those behaviors, behaviors TVC finds immoral. Others, however, believe that reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS increases the security of all, including children who might be born to those who might otherwise contract the disease. TVC condemns an effort to create a multidisciplinary program on reproductive health at Fudan University, suggesting the grant might indicate “the NIH believes China needs more abortionists.” The grant, however, funded conferences and workshops aimed at improving sex education so as to make abortion less common and to improve perinatal care and increase understanding of the epidemiology of sexually transmitted diseases and issues of aging and reproductive health.

China, while poor on a per capita basis, is increasingly investing in medical research. In 2010 it launched a $150 million medical research initiative through its National Natural Science Foundation. The 2010 NIH research budget (excluding management expenses) was $29 billion. NIH funding for China projects in 2010 accounted for less than 0.03% of all NIH research spending. American interests were advanced in the process, through the empirical work done as well as the research networks that were created or strengthened. American assistance addressing health challenges in China has a positive, if limited, effect on Chinese perceptions of the U.S.
Even so, resources are limited. Does the benefit accruing to the U.S. outweigh the cost of these programs? Americans and their officials must determine the answer to this question. The Traditional Values Coalition has raised an important topic: the nature and impact of U.S. assistance to China. TVC materials, however, are too polemical and incomplete to be of much use in making this decision.

Below are links to the NIH and to the TVC materials as well as a list of NIH grants to Chinese researchers not mentioned by the TVC.

*****

NIH grants are awarded on a competitive basis involving review by other scientists. Grantees are required to document progress towards grant objectives. Information on National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants, including publications resulting from the research, is available at the agency’s website: http://projectreporter.nih.gov/reporter.cfm.

*****


The TVC “list of horribles” offers details to support its criticism of NIH grants to Chinese researchers: http://traditionalvalues.org/data/sites/73/pdfs/_Summary%20of%20NIH%20Grants_02_CHINA_FINAL.pdf.

TVC summaries of the programs highlight that some of those studied were young females engaged in sex work. The implication is that studying such populations is unethical. Researchers’ ethics were also questioned in the summary of a study using twins. The implication is that including rural children in the study took advantage of the poor.

Multidisciplinary HIV and TB implementation sciences training in China
2004-2011: $3.6 million

Prophylactic vaccines for schistosomiasis
2007-2011: $2 million

TVC says schistosomiasis is highly treatable and affects “affects snails, water buffalo, and about 1 million Chinese citizens.” The report does not mention that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control says that more than 200 million people are infected worldwide.

Drug use and other risk factors for HIV infection in female sex workers in China
2008-2011: $367,686

Not mentioned in the TVC report: One 2009 publication from the study noted that both men and women significantly modified their risk behaviors following positive HIV tests.
Recommended voluntary testing and partner notification be incorporated into China’s national testing strategy.

Multidisciplinary approaches to reproductive health in global health context
2008-2011: $364,500

The TVC report implies this grant promotes abortion.

Several of the projects included in the list are not currently being funded. Those include:

Expansion of HIV/AIDS prevention, care, treatment and survey activities in China
2003-2007: $17.5 million

Public health education and campaigns in China, 1910-1990
2009-2010: $130,531

Central effects of acupuncture: acupoint specificity
2005-2009: $189,072

Not included in the TVC report: the research used fMRI to determine exactly what prompts the brain’s response to the acupoint. The ultimate aim is the production of guidelines to better select acupoints. One 2009 publication from the project focuses on the mechanism by which acupuncture can mediate pain and anxiety.

China’s integrated programs for research on AIDS
2002-2009: $1.8 million

Sleep and adiposity: a prospective twin study
2006-2009: $2 million

The following current NIH grants were not mentioned in the Traditional Values Coalition report. The list includes research into drug-resistant mosquito-borne diseases, drug-resistant tuberculosis, neurological diseases, and issues related to the aging of China’s population.

Pyrethroid resistance in malaria mosquito anopheles sinensis
2011: $108,000

Looking at how mosquitoes may be becoming resistant to the most commonly employed insecticides.

Insecticide resistance in culex pipens pallens mosquitos
2008-2011: $321,579

This mosquito species spreads Japanese encephalitis and filariasis in China and the West Nile virus in the US. Resistance to the most common pyrethroid insecticides is an increasing problem.
This genetic research aims to understand the resistance and improve detection and monitoring of resistance.

Collaborative care for depressed elders in China
2010-2011: $107,460

Looking at efforts to combine primary health care with mental health care to address this global health problem.

Impacts of urbanization on vector biology and transmission of dengue in China
2010-2011: $213,959

The interval between outbreaks in China has become shorter and the epidemic area wider, perhaps due to rapid urbanization.

China-US collaborative program for maternal-child and family health
2007-2011: $2.9 million

Collaboration between the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Peking University Health Sciences Center to address questions for which data is not available in the US.

Reducing HCV/HIV risk behaviors among injection drug users in China
2011: $104,036

Limited intervention/prevention strategies currently available, methadone maintenance treatment programs can work, but are not widely known or employed. Grant to borrow from and adapt effective materials developed for use in the U.S.

Study on risk factors and control strategy for canine source visceral leishmanias
2009-2011: $77,001

Study looks at a reemerging parasitic disease and how to control it.

Effect of deep brain stimulation on thalamocortical pain processing
2009-2011: $100,171

Research collaboration between Beijing Institute of Psychology and Neuroscience Research Institute of North Carolina. Looking at how deep brain stimulation helps with Parkinson’s disease, epilepsy control, and related brain functions.

Human genetic susceptibility to TB in Chinese Han population
2008-2011: $318,584

Research objective is to identify candidate genes which lead to TB susceptibility.

Building capacity for evidence-based HIV prevention research for men having sex with men in China
2008-2011: $320,681
HIV prevalence in some areas is rising rapidly, especially among men having sex with men. This project aims to improve the theoretical foundation for surveys, prevention work, and intervention research.

HIV/AIDS clinical trial unit in NCAIDS, CDC China
2007-2011: $4.2 million

Established clinical research sites for Vaccine Research and Development, HIV Prevention, and Optimization of Clinical Management, including Co-morbidities.

Social and biomedical risk factors for multi-drug resistant TB in rural China
2007-2010: $352,073

Treatment and control of TB increasingly hampered by emergence of drug-resistant strains of the disease. The study will examine what is producing this problem, thereby aiding in control efforts.

Gender difference of HIV risks among Intravenous Drug Users in China
2006-2010: $252,384

Research to fill a gap on behaviors among women and urban drug users in Shanghai so as to help develop effective HIV/AIDS surveillance and intervention strategies. 2011 publication indications relapse prevention group therapy had a significant impact on promoting abstinence among heroin-dependent individuals.

China health and retirement longitudinal survey (CHARLS)
Note: USC researcher John Strauss (economics) is a co-principal investigator on this study. A presentation Strauss made on this research was part of the USC U.S.-China Institute’s Feb. 2011 conference on The State of the Chinese Economy. You can see it here: http://china.usc.edu/ShowArticle.aspx?articleID=2401.
2010-2011: $2.2 million

China’s population is aging rapidly. This survey is patterned after one conducted in the US. Data from this study will be comparable with that collected elsewhere, so as to permit comparative studies and to identify special Chinese conditions.

Studies of health, retirement, and living arrangements of the aging population in China
Note: USC researcher John Strauss (economics) is a co-principal investigator on this study. See the link above for Strauss’s presentation “As China Ages: Elderly Health Outcomes and Socioeconomic Status.”
2009-2011: $152,250

Collaborative research to draw upon CHARLS data to look at socioeconomic dimensions of health, underdiagnosed diseases among the elderly, retirement behavior and relationship to health of the retired, and how the living arrangements of the elderly impact their health.