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Assessing the Decade of the Brain

Edward G. Jones and Lorne M. Mendell

The 1990s were designated the Decade of the Brain (DOB) by the U.S. Congress. Originally sponsored by Congressman Silvio Conti (R-Mass.) on the recommendation of leaders of the neuroscience community, the proclamation was signed by President George Bush in July 1990. Noting that continued study of the brain was needed to combat the large number of debilitating neural diseases and conditions, it concluded by stating: "To enhance public awareness of the benefits to be derived from brain research, the Congress, by House Joint Resolution 174, has designated the decade beginning January 1, 1990, as the *Decade of the Brain* and has authorized and requested the President to issue a proclamation in observance of this occasion." Although no additional research funding was implicit in this resolution, it stimulated a number of initiatives that have substantially benefited neuroscience.

The DOB has been marked by an extraordinary increase in the visibility of neuroscience. Although the clinical benefits of research findings may have provided more stimulus than the congressional mandate, the DOB resolution provided a forum in which to publicize brain research. The annual DOB Award given by the Society for Neuroscience to an important Washington figure helped raise awareness inside the Beltway. Other programs, such as Brain Awareness Week (sponsored by the Dana Alliance with enthusiastic grassroots support from the Society for Neuroscience), were targeted annually to the country at large. Advocacy groups for individual diseases also became more visible during this period.

Public recognition of the importance of studies of the spinal cord, brain, behavior, and mind is evident in the remarkable bipartisan congressional support for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in general, and for neuroscience in particular, during the past few years. There has also been more media attention to breakthroughs in neuroscience during the DOB. Many factors have influenced this interest, including recognition of the staggering costs of chronic neurological and neuropsychiatric diseases, currently estimated at more than \$400 billion per year, as well as the rapid translation of breakthroughs in fundamental knowledge to the treatment of some of humankind's most devastating disorders, notably stroke and spinal cord injury.* Even when a cure or effective treatment does not yet exist, as in Alzheimer's disease, the attention attracted by recent breakthroughs such as those in stem cell research and the genetics of Parkinson's disease has induced a clear expectation that treatments are not too far away. Identification of the pathophysiology underlying chronic brain and mind disorders has also helped to reduce the stigma attached to these conditions.

There has been explosive growth in the number of scientists identifying themselves as neuroscientists, with more than 1000 new members being added to the Society for Neuroscience in every year of the DOB. Many came from disciplines such as molecular biology and computer science, which are outside the traditional purview of neuroscience, leading to the widespread use of such new techniques as functional imaging and molecular genetics. Also emerging from the DOB has been a remarkable alliance between congressional leaders, the administration, representatives of disease advocacy groups, scientists themselves, and the new breed of leaders at NIH in promoting the cause of neuroscience.

When large resources are required for the pursuit of fundamental research, only continuing commitment by all segments of a democratic society can ensure success. We believe that the DOB has strongly "enhance[d] public awareness of the benefits to be derived from brain research." Its success gives us hope for continued extraordinary progress as we cross the threshold of the new millennium.

The authors are president and past president, respectively, of the Society for Neuroscience in Washington, DC.

*In a symposium held at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC, on 12 and 13 April 1999, the Society for Neuroscience reported on progress during the DOB and predicted advances for the next century. For more information, see the society's Web site at www.sfn.org.

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