NIMH and APA have a shared interest in ensuring that patients and health providers have the best available tools and information today to identify and treat mental health issues, while we continue to invest in improving and advancing mental disorder diagnostics for the future.

Today, the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), along with the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) represents the best information currently available for clinical diagnosis of mental disorders. Patients, families, and insurers can be confident that effective treatments are available and that the DSM is the key resource for delivering the best available care. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has not changed its position on DSM-5. As NIMH’s Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) project website states, “The diagnostic categories represented in the DSM-IV and the International Classification of Diseases-10 (ICD-10, containing virtually identical disorder codes) remain the contemporary consensus standard for how mental disorders are diagnosed and treated.”

Yet, what may be realistically feasible today for practitioners is no longer sufficient for researchers. Looking forward, laying the groundwork for a future diagnostic system that more directly reflects modern brain science will require openness to rethinking traditional categories. It is increasingly evident that mental illness will be best understood as disorders of brain structure and function that implicate specific domains of cognition, emotion, and behavior. This is the focus of the NIMH’s Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) project. RDoC is an attempt to create a new kind of taxonomy for mental disorders by bringing the power of modern research approaches in genetics, neuroscience, and behavioral science to the problem of mental illness.

The evolution of diagnosis does not mean that mental disorders are any less real and serious than other illnesses. Indeed, the science of diagnosis has been evolving throughout medicine. For example, subtypes of cancers once defined by where they occurred in the body are now classified on the basis of their underlying genetic and molecular causes.

All medical disciplines advance through research progress in characterizing diseases and disorders. DSM-5 and RDoC represent complementary, not competing, frameworks for this goal. DSM-5, which will be released May 18, reflects the scientific progress seen since the manual’s last edition was published in 1994. RDoC is a new, comprehensive effort to redefine the research agenda for mental illness. As research findings begin to emerge from the RDoC effort, these findings may be incorporated into future DSM revisions and clinical practice guidelines. But this is a long-term undertaking. It will take years to
fulfill the promise that this research effort represents for transforming the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders.

By continuing to work together, our two organizations are committed to improving outcomes for people with some of the most disabling disorders in all of medicine.

The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society whose physician members specialize in diagnosis, treatment, prevention, and research of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. Visit the APA at www.psychiatry.org.

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