



February 20, 2026

The Honorable Jay Bhattacharya, MD, PhD  
Director, National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

The American College of Rheumatology (ACR), the Rheumatology Research Foundation (RRF), and the Arthritis Foundation write on behalf of our physicians, care team members, and patients to express deep concern about the sudden removal of Dr. Lindsey Criswell as Director of the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS). Dr. Criswell was eminently qualified to lead NIAMS and her tenure as a leader at NIAMS promoted American leadership in the search for arthritis treatments. The decision to not renew Dr. Criswell's tenure marks a historic leadership gap across the agency at a moment of escalating chronic health challenges for millions of people living in the U.S. with arthritis and related conditions.

We call on NIH leadership to immediately form a search committee, including NIAMS funded researchers, to select and install the next Director in a timely manner. We also request that the process be transparent and public. Finally, we request a meeting with you to discuss the future plans of NIAMS and how our organizations can collaborate with you to ensure a strong investment in federally-funded arthritis research in the months and years to come.

Arthritis is the leading cause of disability in the United States, affecting over 58 million (or 1 in 4) adults and nearly 300,000 children<sup>1 2</sup> and imposing more than \$300 billion annually in direct medical costs and indirect costs, such as lost productivity in the workforce.<sup>3</sup> There is still no disease modifying drug for forms of the disease like osteoarthritis, which impacts over 27 million Americans. We fear that a lack of clear long-term leadership at NIAMS presents a barrier

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<sup>1</sup> Rath, L. More Americans Report Arthritis-Related Limitations Than 15 Years Ago. Arthritis Foundation.  
<https://www.arthritis.org/news/arthritis-disability-limitations-increase-cdc-repo>

<sup>2</sup> Juvenile Arthritis. Arthritis Foundation.  
<https://www.arthritis.org/diseases/juvenile-arthritis>.

<sup>3</sup> Theis, Kristina A., et al. (2021, October 8). Prevalence of Arthritis and Arthritis-Attributable Activity Limitation — United States, 2016–2018. Centers for Disease Control.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7040a2.htm>

to innovation aimed at helping Americans with chronic disabling illness. Further, it creates uncertainty for researchers that may erode American leadership in the impacted disease areas.

Dr. Criswell's removal marks 16 of 27 Institutes without a permanent director, which is a great cause for concern. Stable, qualified leadership is essential to stewarding federal investments and sustaining scientific momentum. The leadership disruption at NIAMS, particularly amid widespread NIAMS vacancies and recent reductions to the CDC Arthritis Program by Congress, raises serious concerns about the continuity of scientific progress and our nation's long-term capacity to respond to the growing burden of arthritis, chronic disease, and disability.

The ACR, RRF, and the Arthritis Foundation will continue to advocate for policies that protect arthritis research, strengthen NIH leadership capacity, and ensure that scientific progress remains focused on decreasing the impact of rheumatic disease on Americans and improving lives. Patients, clinicians, and researchers depend on steady federal commitment and transparent leadership processes at NIH.

Sincerely,



Steve Taylor  
Chief Executive Officer, Arthritis Foundation



William F. Harvey, MD, MSc, FACR  
President, American College of Rheumatology



Bryce A. Binstadt, M.D., Ph.D.  
President, Rheumatology Research Foundation