



1600 20th Street, NW • Washington, D.C. 20009 • 202/588-1000 • www.citizen.org

March 22, 2018

The Honorable Daniel R. Levinson
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
330 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

RE: NIH Officials Allegedly Violated the Agency's Policy by Soliciting Donations from Alcoholic Beverage Manufacturers to Fund Study on Health Effects of Moderate Alcohol Consumption

Dear Inspector General Levinson:

Public Citizen, a consumer advocacy organization with more than 400,000 members and supporters nationwide, is writing to follow up on its March 19 letter requesting that your office immediately launch a formal investigation into the conduct of National Institutes of Health (NIH) officials who, according to an article published by *The New York Times* on March 17,¹ were directly involved in soliciting donations from alcoholic beverage manufacturers to fund a \$100 million study that is intended to assess the cardiovascular health effects of moderate alcohol consumption.

As you may be aware, on March 20, the day after we submitted our initial letter to you, NIH Director Dr. Francis Collins announced at an unrelated briefing to reporters that he had assigned a group of advisers to examine whether any improprieties were committed with respect to the alcohol study.²

Any plan for an internal NIH investigation into allegations of serious misconduct by senior agency officials cannot be credible, and Public Citizen strongly urges that you not allow Dr. Collins's announcement to dissuade you from opening the type of independent Inspector General's investigation that these circumstances demand.

As noted in our initial letter, there appears to be substantial evidence that senior officials at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) — in violation of long-standing NIH rules prohibiting solicitations of gifts by agency employees — orchestrated a concerted

¹ Rabin RC. Federal agency courted alcohol industry to fund study on benefits of moderate drinking. March 17, 2018. *New York Times*. <https://nyti.ms/2GAG6Xi>. Accessed March 18, 2018.

² Goldstein A. NIH will examine ethics of its study on the health effects of a daily glass of wine. March 20, 2018. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/nih-will-examine-ethics-of-its-study-on-the-health-effects-of-a-daily-glass-of-wine/2018/03/20/db8f2806-2c78-11e8-b0b0-f706877db618_story.html?utm_term=.6c21902753e1. Accessed March 21, 2018.

campaign to obtain funding from the alcoholic beverage industry for a \$100 million study of the health effects of moderate alcohol consumption. Among the key unanswered questions is whether anyone within the NIH Office of the Director was aware of this campaign.

The alleged misconduct by NIH officials undermines public trust in the integrity of the alcohol study and in the NIH. The agency, especially in light of what is already known, cannot be trusted to conduct a thorough and unbiased internal investigation into this matter. Such an internal investigation is too likely to exonerate current staff within the NIAAA and the NIH Office of the Director who may have played a role in, or previously been aware of, the campaign to obtain funding for the alcohol study from the alcoholic beverage industry.

An independent investigation by your office is necessary for restoring public trust in the alcohol study and in the NIH and for ensuring that all culpable NIH officials are held accountable.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter. Please contact me at 202-588-7781 or mcarome@citizen.org if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Michael A. Carome".

Michael A. Carome, M.D.
Director
Public Citizen's Health Research Group

cc: The Honorable Alex Azar, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services