

NEWS

Video: NIH director has big plans for autism research

BY VIRGINIA HUGHES

19 OCTOBER 2009

It's been just over two months since **Francis Collins** stepped in as the new head of the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Collins was head of the **National Human Genome Research Institute** for 15 years, and led the high-profile **Human Genome Project**, so he is no stranger to the limelight. But as head of the NIH, in charge of a \$31 billion annual budget, he is a powerful man with big ambitions.

At the **Society for Neuroscience meeting** in Chicago today, Collins told a packed hall that one of his major goals will be "to tackle questions that have the word 'all' in them": for example, what are

all of the protein interactions in a cell, and what are all the ion channels in a given neuron?

In particular, Collins spent a large part of his talk highlighting recent research on autism, "a disease of great public concern and great scientific puzzlement," and the related fragile X syndrome. He said that high-throughput technology has already identified more than 50 variations, both rare and common, linked to autism spectrum disorders. He added that \$30 million dollars of funds from the **American Recovery and Reinvestment Act** will be used for full sequencing of target genes and, for a few individuals with the disorder, whole-genome sequencing.

Collins also talked to SFARI in more detail about the agency's upcoming plans for "beefing up" its autism research, including more than \$100 million each year in grants for the field.