Message from the Chairman

Dear Friends:

Major advances in neuroscience, brain imaging and behavioral research show that addiction is a complex brain disease affecting behavior. Unfortunately, public understanding of the disease, as well as public policy and health care practice, have not yet caught up with the science, and addiction is still too often viewed as a moral failing or lack of willpower.

We know that more than 1 in 7 Americans ages 12 and older (40 million) have addiction involving nicotine, alcohol or other drugs. That’s more than the number of people with heart conditions (27 million), diabetes (21 million) or cancer (19 million). An additional 80 million people engage in risky use of addictive substances in ways that can threaten public health and safety, but don’t meet the medical criteria for the disease. Together, risky substance use and addiction are responsible for at least 579,000 of the 2.5 million deaths each year in the U.S. and contribute to more than 70 other diseases requiring medical attention.

Despite the fact that effective behavioral and pharmaceutical treatments are available, only 11 percent of people in need of treatment for addiction involving alcohol or drugs other than nicotine receive any form of treatment, and we don’t even know how many receive care for addiction involving nicotine. Most who do receive help do not receive evidence-based treatment.

Those living with addiction, and their families, often feel isolated in their struggle to understand the disease and find effective treatment. This is due in part to the shame and stigma attached to addiction and to the separation of most treatment from mainstream health care practice.

CASAColumbia remains committed to understanding the science of addiction and translating this science into health care practice, public policy and public understanding.

This year, two particular substance-related issues have received considerable press attention — electronic cigarettes and marijuana. In both cases, existing science is largely being ignored at great risk to young people and future costs to society.
CASAColumbia’s position on electronic cigarettes, also known as e-cigarettes, is that while e-cigarettes are probably less toxic than conventional cigarettes, there is no evidence to ensure their safety and some evidence to suggest they may carry negative health effects that should not be ignored. Their safety and utility for smoking cessation are unknown. CASAColumbia is opposed to the unregulated production, promotion and selling of e-cigarettes. While many are touting e-cigarettes as a safe alternative to traditional cigarettes, they still pose a serious health risk because, like traditional cigarettes, they deliver nicotine, a highly addictive drug. In fact, a growing body of evidence suggests that early use of nicotine increases the risk of use and of addiction involving not only nicotine but other drugs. We are especially alarmed by the high rates of young people who have tried and regularly use e-cigarettes. CASAColumbia recommends that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) take immediate action to assert the regulatory authority granted in The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act and regulate e-cigarettes as cigarettes, and that the federal and state governments tax them accordingly.

Marijuana is also a complicated and polarized issue. While there are components in marijuana that have medicinal value, America has an established process for bringing drugs to market while ensuring their safety and efficacy. We know that marijuana is an addictive drug that can be particularly dangerous when used by teens and young adults during critically important periods of brain development. We also know that many people who use marijuana also use other addictive substances. CASAColumbia experts are working on a more detailed position statement about marijuana which will be guided by several fundamental assumptions including our belief that any public policies and laws related to this drug should be based on scientific knowledge of marijuana’s effects. CASAColumbia also does not support policies and practices that increase the likelihood of risky substance use (alcohol, nicotine, prescription drugs, marijuana or any other illicit drug) among young people and other vulnerable groups of people.

This year marked a time of change in executive leadership at CASAColumbia. Our interim President and CEO Bill Foster left this past summer to pursue other career opportunities. I would like to personally thank Bill for his enormous effort in leading CASAColumbia down a strategic and focused path for the past three years. Bill’s strong belief in our mission will make him a lifelong friend of CASAColumbia.

Finding a new President and CEO for CASAColumbia was no easy task. A national search was conducted to fill the position, and from a pool of 60 applicants, we were able to narrow the search down to one special individual, Samuel Ball, PhD. CASAColumbia’s Board of Directors and I couldn’t be more pleased with Sam’s appointment. Sam is an expert in substance addiction research, and he also serves as Professor of Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine where he is also the Assistant Chair for Education and Career Development and the Research Director for Yale’s Women’s Health and Addictive Behaviors Scholars Program. Sam is the ideal leader to take CASAColumbia into our next phase of development. Under Sam’s leadership we will begin to broaden our mission to look at all forms of addiction and addictive behaviors.

Important work was done in 2013 building our new website. In mid-December all of that hard work came to fruition with the launch of the new CASAColumbia.org, complete with a blog and social media extensions. The new website is an interactive and mobile-friendly source of news, research and other information on addiction and substance use. Created for anyone interested in learning about addiction, it also has specific portals for policymakers and health care providers, as well as general information for researchers and patients and their families and friends, allowing the user to have a tailor-made experience. Our blog, The Buzz, focuses on the latest news and trends in addiction research and aims to
spark thoughtful and provocative conversations, while our Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ and SlideShare channels allow us to engage and interact with you on a regular basis.

We have achieved a great deal in the past 20 years under the leadership of CASA Columbia’s Founder and Chairman Emeritus, Joseph A. Califano, Jr. There remains much more work to do and we need everyone’s help.

As science unlocks the complex addiction puzzle, we will find new, better ways to prevent, treat and perhaps even eliminate this devastating disease. By better understanding this complex disease, we will improve health, save lives and save money — because ending addiction will change everything.

Jeffrey B. Lane