LETTERS

Freedom of Information

In his letter of 21 November 1975 (p. 736) Edward D. Korn discusses the serious ethical and practical questions raised by the Freedom of Information Act that now allows one scientist to have access to the grant proposal of another. Korn and many others suspect that there may be abuses. A scientist's ideas are his prime commodity. The manner in which he develops them is an essential ingredient in his professional advancement.

Korn's letter includes a statement of scientists at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) who strongly urge their colleagues not to request copies of grant applications.

If the Freedom of Information Act allows one scientist to see the grant proposal of another, surely it will allow the rest of us to know who has made the request. I suggest, therefore, that the names of all individuals who have requested copies of the grant proposals of others be published, possibly in *Science*, together with the titles of the requested proposals and the names of those who submitted them.

Should a list of those who invade the privacy of their fellow scientists be published, its length might quickly approach the vanishing point.

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We wish to add our own concern to that of Edward D. Korn regarding the decision of the District of Columbia Court of Appeals not to exempt grant applications to NIH for research support from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act. The court's decision conflicts with the right to privacy of each investigator. Grants are often awarded on the basis of the uniqueness of expressed ideas and the proved or potential ability of the investigator to complete the proposed experiments. Accessibility of these "privileged communications" to the general scientific community preempts the grantee's own right to test his formulations without concern for wholesale distribution of his ideas. The proliferation of scientific journals, meetings proceedings, and newsletters for the exchange of research experience and ideas has never been greater and continues to expand. The need for scientists to have access to their colleagues' grant applications under these circumstances seems suspect.

Communication between scientists has traditionally been very open. Our own inquiries for information from individuals in areas of "direct" competition have always been answered with the most courteous, informative, and genuinely helpful kinds of responses. As Korn suggests, this intervention may encourage secretive competition and the involution of the current expressive and open scientific attitude. As far as research grants are concerned, there seems very little to be gained through the Freedom of Information Act, but a great deal to be lost. It encourages "scientists" with questionable ethics to seek new and stimulating ideas via the easy route of obtaining successful grant applications for their own professional advancement. We agree with Korn that *all* scientists should adopt a policy as outlined by the Inter-Assembly Council of NIH-NIMH to consider the ethical questions of obtaining such grant applications and not to make such requests.

Publication of the names of those individuals making requests would inform the scientific community of the extent of this activity and discourage the use of the grant applications for any purpose other than general background information.

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I endorse the suggestions of the NIH-NIMH Inter-Assembly Council and of Edward D. Korn and suggest an additional policy. Inasmuch as the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act and the interpretation of that act by the District of Columbia Court of Appeals places grant applications in the public domain and requires that copies be made available to anyone who asks, it seems reasonable that granting agencies, journal editors, and members of the scientific community should henceforth consider a grant application (approved or not) a professional communication whose contents can be cited by the writer of the application for the usual scientific and professional purposes, as evidence of prior publication.

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I take strong exception to the comments of Edward D. Korn regarding the usage by scientists of their fellow scientists' grant applications. It is sad indeed that a court of justice had to intervene to safeguard the rights of the public. Korn's suggestion to scientists to refrain from exercising their legal right is inappropriate in an open and free society. In addition to its pervading implications in science, the suggestion may have far-reaching social, ethical, and legal repercussions.

Korn raises the questions of the possible adverse effect of public distribution of grant copies on the task of evaluation by study sections, on scientific exchange, and on secretive competition among scientists. Knowledgeable scientists fully conversant with the disadvantages of peer review include as much material in their grant proposals as they feel will land them the grant without jeopardizing their originality. Contrary to Korn's fear, I feel scientists will continue to be as explicit in their grant proposals as they deem necessary in their self-interest. In fact, with the knowledge that their proposals may be made public, scientists are likely to submit better proposals in the future, taking the same care and caution that they take when submitting articles for publication. This will facilitate, rather than make more difficult, the task of study sections in weeding out the less desirable proposals.

An open grant system will provide an additional forum for scientific communication among investigators in diverse geographical and professional areas, as publications do now. Furthermore, successful grant applications will also serve to educate the uninitiated in the art of grantmanship. Competition, secretive or open, engenders productivity. Besides, many would agree that as mortals we scientists fare no better than others when it comes to vices associated with self-survival.

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Bicentennial Bells: A "Precedent"

Constance Holden's article "The Bicentennial: Science loses out" (News and Comment, 8 Aug. 1975, p. 438) opens with the sentence, "It has been rumored that someone's idea of an arresting way to celebrate America's science and technology for her 200th birthday is to build a firecracker that could be seen from the moon"; in closing, the article mentions