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LETTERS

Peer Review at ADAMHA

We appreciate the *Science* follow-up "Peer review comes to ADAMHA" (News and Comment, 11 May, p. 601) on the changes in peer review recently instituted by the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration. Although the article presents many events correctly, misinterpretations and errors create some confusion.

The author is correct in stating that, soon after my appointment as administrator in 1977, I viewed as one of my most important tasks the installing of a more rigorous grants review process independent of the program staff. He also is correct in reporting that the centralization of peer review in the ADAMHA institutes represents a modification of my initial proposal. But he fails to add that I am fully in accord with the changes adopted, believing firmly that they embody the principle of appropriate independence of the review process from program management.

The title "Peer review comes to ADAMHA" implies that peer review is new to ADAMHA. In fact, the ADAMHA institutes have employed peer review throughout their history. The agency's organizational predecessor—the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)—was a part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) until 1967. After 1967, NIMH, as well as the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institute on Drug Abuse when they were established, continued to subject grant applications to peer review. However, the review committees and the review process were managed in some 30 program branches and ten divisions within the three institutes. It was this feature of the system that was changed by the reorganization.

The purpose of the new system is to provide for the independent review of grant applications by peer review groups organized and staffed in a separate organizational element in the office of each institute director. The review for scientific and technical merit of grant applications is carried out in the review organizations. The peer review groups make recommendations on the merits of individual grant applications and assign priority scores. These applications are later reviewed by the national advisory council of each institute. Grants recommended for approval by these statutory bodies may be awarded by the staff scientists and program managers who make funding decisions, taking into account the

priority scores, current priorities, and available funds. The statement that "... the new system attempts to insulate the research funding offices within ADAMHA from the staff scientists and program managers" is totally erroneous.

Furthermore, it is not true that until recently employees of the ADAMHA institutes were allowed to sit on committees that approved extramural projects. Agency employees have never been appointed to such review groups, and even federal employees from other agencies are restricted by ADAMHA policy to no more than one per committee, a provision used infrequently.

The article's inaccurate account of the prior ADAMHA peer review system and of the changes that were recently made are misleading. The author's apparent inclination to conjure up intrigue where none existed is unfortunate; for example, in using the term "scheme" to describe the reorganization of peer review. His allegation of "egregious cases of cronyism" at the National Institute on Drug Abuse is unfounded. The few contracts under review were found to involve the *appearance*, not the practice, of cronyism.

A major function of ADAMHA is the award of funds by means of grants and contracts for research, training, and services. The integrity and credibility of science in the United States depends upon the manner in which decisions are made as to the allocation of such monies. An objective, independent peer review system is essential. To treat such a serious subject in this fashion may be journalistically interesting and even titillating, but it is a disservice to *Science's* readers.

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Human Cancer: Radiation and Chemicals Compete

The widespread antinuclear alarm connected with the accident at Three Mile Island has its reflection in the title "BEIR report on radiation hazards comes unglued" (News and Comment, 8 June, p. 1062). In addition to this "ungluing" (1), my present concern is with the most laudable decision of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) to undertake extensive studies of public health effects of the accident.

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20 JULY 1979

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