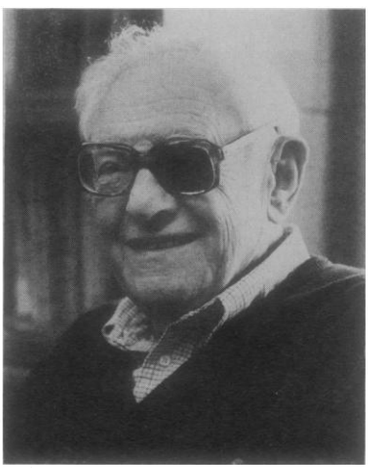
Retiring Frees NIH "Guest" to Consult

After a distinguished research career at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) campus in Bethesda, Maryland, Nobel laureate Julius Axelrod has retired—and immediately become an unpaid guest worker in the laboratory of his former postdoc, Michael Brownstein. The personal reason for Axelrod in this change of status is liberation, in part, from NIH's restrictions on consulting for private industry. He now is consulting for a biotechnology company and several nonprofit organizations. And, although NIH officials say that Axelrod's situation is "tailored to Julie" and thus is "not a model," his change of status has come in the midst of negotiations between NIH and the Department of Health and Human Services over a modest loosening of NIH standards for outside consulting.

Currently, NIH scientists can do little to supplement their government-set salaries. Anyone in a major clinical position, for example, is expressly forbidden to moonlight by practicing medicine privately. Restrictions are only slightly less severe for other researchers, with basic scientists being allowed to receive honoraria for lectures and less senior physicians being permitted to practice medicine outside NIH in a very limited fashion. [One noteworthy exception has been at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), which strictly speaking is not part of NIH, where psychiatrists are allowed to have private patients.] Axelrod, who does basic research on the nervous system, has been associated with NIMH, where he will continue doing research in the laboratory of cell biology, headed by Brownstein.



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Julius Axelrod

New status is "like being a gentleman scientist in the old days."

Axelrod's situation is unique for many reasons, undoubtedly the foremost being that he is held in such high regard at NIH. His age and intellectual energy also are important. At 72, he has been eligible for retirement—there is no mandatory retirement age at NIH—for several years. A major reason he is able to become an unsalaried guest worker is because of generous retirement benefits due him after 33 years of service. Guest worker status also means that, although he will have office and lab space as well as secretarial and technical assistance, he no longer occupies an official intramural senior scientist slot.

Several ironies attend Axelrod's shift in status. For instance, he is acquiring his own office for the first time in his years at NIH. He had skipped that amenity because he preferred having a desk in his cluttered lab where he could enjoy spontaneous contact with his fellows. "I never had a big lab and never became a lab chief because I couldn't stand the bureaucracy," he says. Now he is freed still further from bureaucratic demands, increasing his cherished freedom "to follow my own nose."

One direction Axelrod's nose has taken him, which NIH's restrictions had been forbidding him to pursue, has been to do outside consulting. Specifically, Axelrod now is free to consult with a company in Baltimore called Nova Pharmaceutical which was established in part by Solomon Snyder of Johns Hopkins University, who also was a postdoc of Axelrod's. Snyder's involvement with Nova typifies the freedom permitted many biomedical researchers at universities, who often receive NIH grant support at the same time as they are involved with companies.

"Some of us at NIH haven't got the same rights as academics for consulting," Axelrod says. "I can't see why." But on reflection, he admits to feeling ambivalent about the problem, recognizing the need for the government's scientists "to be pristine." He is also bothered by the more frequent "need for secrecy" in corporate research. "I don't feel that strongly that the government should let down the barriers—it should just be less rigid."

Axelrod says that his consulting relationship with Nova does not take up much of his time or involve large payments. He is interested in the drugs the company is trying to develop because they depend on the science in which he is most interested. Besides his involvement with Nova, he also has joined the advisory boards of several nonprofit organizations and he is still "getting all kinds of requests" to join more. "I am becoming a guru," he quips, adding more seriously: "The important thing is I no longer feel guilty. I think there should be some rapport between NIH and industry. It can benefit the scientists at NIH."

Axelrod is referring to a potential benefit for NIH scientists that goes beyond income supplementation. The biotechnology explosion has dramatically changed the relationship between academic and industrial biologists during the past several years. Although NIH hopes soon to overhaul the salary structure for intramural researchers, these changes will not fully answer the urge of some scientists to be a part of the "action" in industry, according to Joseph E. Rall, deputy director for intramural research at NIH. Although the same degree of involvement with industry now common in universities "never would happen at NIH," he says, some minor changes to make collaborations more fluid are under consideration.

Axelrod "is not the beginning of a trend but a unique case," says Philip Chen, Rall's close associate, who has chaired a committee that has been looking into NIH's relations with industry. Any changes affecting NIH as a whole are expected to be "minor."

Axelrod, who delights in his newfound freedom to consult while remaining at NIH, would rather not become a test case—or anything of the sort. "It's like being a gentleman scientist in the old days," he says of his guest-worker status. "I have the best of two worlds."

—JEFFREY L. FOX