

WHO more power to run national health care programs. It's also time, Merson says, to focus on a few approaches calculated to have the greatest impact on slowing the spread of AIDS. He plans, for example, to concentrate resources on educating teenagers in Africa about safe sex (complete with programs to distribute condoms), because changing their behavior would have the most profound impact. His strategy, he says, is to try to do a few things well rather than be spread thin.

Even if the changes at the Global Program on AIDS are subtle, they may have significant consequences for international AIDS policy. That's because "WHO is unquestionably the principal and leading coordinator of AIDS activities in the developing countries," says William Mayer, director of the International Forum on AIDS Research at the Institute of Medicine at the National Academy of Sciences.

With a budget of \$90 million this year (\$20.6 million comes from the United States and the rest is raised from other nations and private sources), the WHO coordinates the global assault on AIDS, of which there are now some 600,000 cases worldwide, according to recent WHO estimates. The bulk of WHO's AIDS budget—about 70%—is spent to help governments in developing nations set up programs to prevent the spread of the disease.

Those efforts range from convincing government leaders to recognize the disease as a problem in their countries to screening blood supplies and sending in epidemiologists to identify how AIDS is transmitted in a given population—whether through heterosexual contact, as has been found to be the predominant route in most African nations, or through intravenous drug use or homosexual contact.

That information and other research is then used to help nations design local programs to slow the spread of AIDS and to decide how to spend scarce resources to treat those who are infected. The other 30% of the AIDS budget pays for global research and policy coordination.

As Merson begins his preparation for the transition, Nakajima is making a visible effort to repair the damage from his falling-out with Mann and to show he is committed to the campaign against AIDS: He was to travel with Merson from Geneva to San Francisco this week to attend the 6th International Conference on AIDS, which WHO agreed recently to cosponsor. And in a speech to the program's management committee on 26 April, Nakajima said, "WHO and I personally continue to give the highest priority to the Global Program on AIDS."

■ ANN GIBBONS

## Peer Review Under Review

An investigation by the General Accounting Office has turned up no evidence that peer review procedures at six federal agencies violate researchers' rights under the Privacy Act or that grant-seekers are failing to get documents they are entitled to see. These are the first conclusions to emerge from a broad survey of the government's peer review procedures that the GAO launched in January at the request of Senator John Glenn (D-OH), chairman of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee.

The inquiry was prompted in part by disclosures in the case of Jon Kalb—a geologist who charged that malicious gossip in a review session at the National Science Foundation in 1977 caused him to lose a grant and be denied access to a research site in Ethiopia. He sued. In 1987, the agency settled, giving Kalb about \$20,000 to cover his legal expenses. With the help of a public interest attorney, Kalb then petitioned NSF to overhaul its peer review system and appealed to Congress and the NSF inspector general to take a look.

NSF, meanwhile, made some significant changes in its methods in 1988, inspired—according to agency officials—mainly by recommendations from its own staff and the National Science Board. In a letter to Kalb's attorney in March, NSF general counsel Charles Herz wrote that grant applicants will be told from now on that they have a right under the Privacy Act to inspect files dealing with their own proposals. They will also be allowed to correct mistakes and appeal a ruling if they think a proposal has not been "fairly handled and reasonably evaluated." Herz added that the agency is changing the rules to make it clear that an appeal may be based not only on procedural grounds, but also on matters of substance.

At the same time, Herz wrote that the agency would not adopt a number of other measures requested by Kalb and his attorney, because "rules, clauses, regulations, and requirements have an insidious way of accumulating." Over time, they cause the entire system to silt up with legalese. "Complying with all these directives drains public resources and the vitality, vigor, and flexibility of public institutions," Herz wrote.

Similarly, NSF director Erich Bloch told Representative Robert Wise (D-WV), who also took an interest in Kalb's case, that he would not agree to release the names of people sitting on peer review committees. In justification, Bloch cited section (k) (5) of the Privacy Act, which exempts federal contract award committees from normal rules on public disclosure.

While the NSF has been modernizing its peer review system, its own inspector general—at Kalb's request—looked into past conduct and found it inadequate. An internal memo dated 30 March concludes that the agency, in fact, did operate a duplicate filing system, as Kalb charged, in an attempt to minimize disclosures under the Privacy Act. NSF failed to comply with the Privacy Act between September 1975 and August 1988, the inspector general wrote, "apparently because there was concern about possible serious ramifications for its peer review system." The violation was referred to the Justice Department, which declined to prosecute. The inspector general found, however, that the agency is now "striving to comply fully with any and all legal requirements." The report concludes that grant applicants should be told that files—including those running back to 1975—are open to their inspection under the Privacy Act.

The much broader inquiry conducted by GAO has found that this violation of Privacy Act rules was limited in time and scope. According to GAO investigator Lawrence Herrmann, "We didn't find as serious or widespread a problem as we expected" when staffers visited other agencies. In addition to NSF, the GAO called on the National Institutes of Health, the Veterans Affairs Department, the Department of Energy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. GAO is now preparing a letter to Senator Glenn telling him that there is not enough evidence to merit further investigation of potential violations of the law.

However, another GAO team is planning to continue a general examination of peer review, Herrmann says, to "look at the consistency of the process" from agency to agency and to consider questions of fairness and equity. "We're not trying to put dogs in fights," says one Senate staffer. "We just want to learn as a general matter" how well the system is working. The task will take several months.

■ ELIOT MARSHALL