

SCIENCE

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LETTERS

Radiation Studies

Science has made public (M. Balter, News & Comment, 3 Feb., p. 611) that the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has decided to remove the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) as co-administrator of the Radiation Effects Research Foundation (RERF) in Hiroshima-Nagasaki. The article properly focuses on two aspects of widespread concern: the need for a buffer between DOE and RERF to safeguard scientific integrity of this research and the anticipated negative reaction of the Japanese side, which has not been consulted.

Details of the plan appear to have been worked out privately between DOE and the potential grantee, Columbia University, which made an "unsolicited proposal" to assume certain scientific evaluation and management roles. These details have yet to be made known to RERF or the Japanese government, although aspects can be inferred from DOE statements of general intentions. It is reasonably clear that (i) DOE intends to take, indeed is already taking, a far more direct role in this research than ever before; (ii) the scientific management by Columbia would differ from the previous NAS arrangement, particularly with regard to collaboration of U.S. scientists; and (iii) that a DOE consideration is whether the research priorities at RERF could be modified to be more consistent with DOE needs. In particular, it appears that a consideration attractive to DOE involves assessing the cost effectiveness—in view of the DOE's particular needs for more information on low-dose risks—of continued follow-up of the atomic bomb survivors.

Of course, DOE has some responsibility to consider what type of radiation research is most consistent with their particular needs. However, the role of the U.S. involvement in RERF goes beyond DOE research needs. The United States and Japan have a binational agreement—made by the Department of State and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—to jointly fund and administer the follow-up of the atomic bomb survivors for both scientific and humanitarian purposes. It is contrary to the terms of that agreement for either country to substantially modify the nature of their involvement except in consultation with the other. It is not appropriate for DOE to unilaterally and privately make plans that will surely affect the U.S. role in fulfilling the aims of the establish-

ment of RERF. Not only is DOE ignoring the binational nature of RERF, but they do not appear to recognize that it is not the purpose of RERF to meet particular needs of DOE. Quite the contrary, the obvious difficulties presented by that are precisely the reason for the NAS buffer.

Independent of any need for change, the scientific staff of RERF are extremely upset by the secretive, heavy-handed, and disingenuous manner with which DOE has gone about trying to achieve its objectives. DOE's Harry Pettengill recently informed us that DOE had "put the word on the street" that they would entertain "unsolicited proposals." Faculty at several universities who have been involved with RERF have told us that they were unaware of this opportunity. Pettengill avoids consultation with the Japanese government or RERF on scientific issues by maintaining that the new grantee will have the same relation to RERF as has NAS and that nothing will change in the relationship of DOE to RERF, when in fact almost every action taken, and statement offered to justify why a change from NAS is needed, belies these claims. We are being contacted by U.S. researchers whom the Columbia principal investigator is enlisting, with no consultation with us, for collaboration with RERF.

With regard both to the scientific integrity of RERF and the commitment of the United States to this binational effort, it is urgent that the U.S. government beyond DOE become involved in evaluating these plans. We urge the scientific community to help ensure that this comes about.

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