

NIMH: Caught in the Line of Fire Without a General

Two lightning bolts have struck the federal government's program of mental health research in recent weeks: a major setback in recruiting new leadership and a blast of negative publicity from Congress. The two events have sent morale at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) plummeting.

For more than a year, NIMH has been without a permanent chief, and recent efforts to recruit a leader seem to have gone down a blind alley. One top candidate for the job died last December (*Science*, 13 January p. 170). Then in April, psychiatrist Joseph Coyle of Harvard Medical School declined the post. Coyle says he begged off for personal reasons: His family had recently moved from Baltimore to Boston and didn't want to be uprooted again.

After hearing that news, Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health, disbanded the search committee and began making plans to assemble a new one, according to NIH staffers. Varmus said in a telephone interview with *Science* that he is "extending [the search] ... with some changes" in the search committee. "I am hopeful of get-

ting someone very good," says Varmus, adding that he considers the NIMH position "as important as any that I will have to fill" as NIH director.

This deliberate pace could be dangerous, says Laurie Flynn, executive director of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, a patient advocate group that claims 140,000 members. "This is a time of real peril," says Flynn, because of the "unprecedented pressure on the federal budget." Like Alan Kraut, executive director of the American Psychological Society, she praises acting Director Rex Cowdry for the "good job" he has done in defending the budget. But she argues that mental health research "needs the sense of stability and clarity of vision that only a permanent director can provide." NIMH also lacks a permanent deputy director and scientific director, posts that are likely to be filled after the director is chosen.

Flynn argues that reopening the search could delay the process 4 to 6 months. She also faults Varmus for setting selection criteria that are "too exclusive." Among those criteria, she says, are a preference for youth

and "a strong bias toward molecular biology and genetics." One NIMH branch chief who asked not to be named disagreed. Although the delay may depress morale in the short run, the branch chief said, it's important that Varmus take his time finding an outstanding leader who's plugged into the "new biology" of genetics and mental health.

Many NIMH staffers share Flynn's concern about the absence of a director, however. They fear that the institute is vulnerable to the recent spate of attacks from Republican members of a key House appropriations subcommittee, who suggested some of its research was irrelevant and wasteful. In March, Representative Ernest Istook (R-OK) and subcommittee Chair John Porter (R-IL) used a critique of NIMH, prepared jointly by the Church of Scientology—a longtime opponent of psychiatry—and the Council Against Government Waste (CAGW), to question the value and plausibility of about 30 NIMH extramural grants, many of them studies of animal sexual behavior.

NIMH staffers are alarmed by the language of the Scientology-CAGW critique. For example, the document described research by psychobiologist William Morse of Harvard University as "a 31-year study on how rhesus monkeys reacted while being tortured while on mind-altering drugs." In fact, according to NIMH, the focus of this early work was to examine "how medications (such as anti-psychotic and anti-anxiety drugs) that are used therapeutically ... affect both physiological functions (such as blood pressure) and behavior." Furthermore, says NIMH, the "monkeys were not tortured," and their use was "especially appropriate ... because the effects of medications on these animals are reliable indicators of their effects on people." The worry is that the Scientology-CAGW description lends itself to use in TV and radio soundbites. Indeed, as *Science* went to press, Sam Donaldson, host of ABC News' tabloid show, *Prime Time Live*, was planning to air a report on NIMH later this month.

The disarray at NIMH has also provided fertile ground for rumors that NIH is planning a major reorganization of all "brain research." The idea is plausible, because both Congress and the Administration are looking for ways to consolidate federal offices. Flynn and Coyle, among others, said they had heard talk that neuroscience programs of NIMH might be merged with those at other institutes. Varmus's response: "Nothing like that is in the works."

One thing is clear, however: NIMH is likely to remain uncomfortably in the spotlight. Says Istook's press secretary, Steve Jones: "We'll be taking a hard look at NIMH"—perhaps including a detailed look at the research it funds—in the coming weeks as budget decisions are made.

—Eliot Marshall

NIH Names Behavioral Research Czar

The National Institutes of Health announced last week that psychologist Norman Anderson of Duke University will be the first director of the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, a unit located in the office of the NIH director. The appointment, which comes more than 2 years after Congress told NIH to establish the office, gave behavioral researchers something to cheer about amid the concern about attacks on mental health research (see main text).



Norman Anderson

"We think Norm is the perfect choice for this time at NIH," says Alan Kraut, head of the American Psychological Society, who notes that Anderson "sits at the apex of two burgeoning fields"—minorities and aging. An associate professor of psychiatry and psychology at Duke, Anderson specializes in hypertension in blacks, and he founded Duke's program on Health, Behavior, and Aging in Black Americans.

The behavioral office, like those on women's health and alternative medicine, will coordinate behavioral research throughout NIH. Anderson says his first task will be to "come up with a uniform definition of behavioral and social science," followed by a "comprehensive assessment" of how much NIH spends on such research.

Some observers have felt that NIH Director Harold Varmus is less than enthusiastic about social science research—one symptom being the glacial pace at which NIH set up the new office. But Anderson says his meetings with Varmus persuade him otherwise. "He admits that's not his area of expertise, but he sees one of my primary jobs as showing him the best we have to offer, and I can't wait to start doing that."

—C.H.