

about the proposed cuts. But Kevin Marvel, who heads public policy for the American Astronomical Society, says the problem is the larger politics of budget caps and the jockeying for funds inside NASA. "Blaming the community for a battle being lost internally is the wrong road," he says.

—ANDREW LAWLER

With reporting by Jeffrey Mervis.

## BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH

### AIDS Researchers Blast NIH Peer Review Plan

A scheme to overhaul peer review at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is drawing intense fire from the AIDS community. Complaints from patient activists and scientists have been piling up for the past 2 weeks at NIH's Center for Scientific Review (CSR), which is considering recommendations from a panel headed by Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences, to reshuffle the groups that rank grant applications (*Science*, 30 July, p. 666).

The Alberts committee suggested grouping peer review panels under broad areas of science rather than specific disease categories or research methods, as many are grouped now. For example, the panel proposed doing away with the category "AIDS and AIDS related research" and moving the seven study sections grouped under this heading into new, more general science categories (such as immunology). The scheme allows reviewers to be moved readily from one panel to another within each grouping. But one critic, Mario Stevenson, a virologist at the University of Massachusetts, Worcester, says: "The logic [of the new proposal] isn't apparent to me. ... I think reviews in the AIDS area are working very well."

Stevenson is part of a group of scientists who endorsed a protest letter circulated by AIDS researcher Ron Desrosiers of Harvard University's New England Primate Research Center in Southborough, Massachusetts. They argue that eliminating the AIDS-specific category would dilute expertise and lower the quality of peer review. In addition, Charles Carpenter of Brown University, chair of the council that advises the NIH Office of AIDS Research, has sent CSR a letter on behalf of council members warning that the proposed reform could "cause irreparable harm" by exposing grant proposals "to review by investigators lacking the appropriate knowledge of AIDS research." Neal Nathanson, director of NIH's Office of AIDS Research, has also expressed his concerns about the plan in an informal e-mail to Elvera Ehrenfeld, director of CSR. Nathanson was unavailable for comment.

Ehrenfeld says she was surprised by the

angry response from the AIDS community. She thinks AIDS researchers may be confused by "an unfortunate misunderstanding" that existing study sections would disappear. The AIDS panels would simply be placed in new groupings, she says. For example, the panel reviewing AIDS-related behavior research might be grouped with behavioral research, and other AIDS study sections might be grouped with virology or immunology. Furthermore, none of this is set in stone. Some of the criticism "may be valid," Ehrenfeld says, "and that's why we asked for comments." Alberts also wants to dispel concern: "Clearly we need to explore with the AIDS researchers exactly what it is that bothers them and why. After this detailed discussion, the committee will decide, based on science, how to modify our report."

Comments are due by 15 October. In early November, a CSR advisory council will discuss the next step.

—ELIOT MARSHALL

## UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

### Chancellor Quits After Research Shutdown

Already reeling from a federal suspension of its clinical research, the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC), got another jolt this month: the sudden resignation of its chancellor, David Broski, on 9 September. Broski appears to be the third—and highest ranking—school official to fall in the course of a simmering 2-year conflict involving the university's Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), which review research proposals that involve human subjects.

On 27 August, the National Institutes of Health's Office for Protection from Research Risks (OPRR), a watchdog agency that monitors compliance with federal rules on human subjects research, suspended about 1000 NIH-funded projects at UIC. This is the latest in a wave of OPRR crackdowns across the country, including one last fall at Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center in Chicago. The office acted after determining that some UIC research had been conducted without IRB review, and in some instances it found that investigators had failed to obtain informed consent. Senior officials, OPRR said, "knew, or should have known, about these deficiencies."

According to Stanley Schade, professor of hematology and oncology and former chair of the biomedical IRB, the problems began about 2 years ago when a woman

complained that her confidentiality had been violated after she was given brain scans while going through an induced episode of a dissociative disorder. When it was discovered that this study had never been submitted to the IRB, the university set up a task force to determine how to tighten up procedures. Despite these efforts, sources say, there was continuing friction between the IRB and its support staff, and university officials anxious to keep the stream of grants coming in. For example, Lynda Brodsky, the former staff chief, says one department would get preliminary NIH approval for a study and then "pressure the IRB to rubber-stamp it." Brodsky says she was removed from her job in July 1998. Then last January, 10 of the 12 members of the biomedical IRB resigned to protest, among other things, Brodsky's departure and staff shortages.

In March, after receiving a whistleblower's complaint, OPRR started investigating the university's human subjects research procedures. Three months later the vice chancellor for research, Mi Ja Kim, resigned. But if the move was meant to appease OPRR, it was either too little or too late: In addition to suspending UIC's human subjects research, the office said that staffing and technical support for the university's three IRBs was "markedly insufficient" to the point that it "undermined the mission of the IRB." On 30 August, immediately after the suspension, Broski told an open meeting at the university that "the buck stops at my desk, and I take responsibility for the findings." University president James Stukel would say only that Broski left for "personal reasons."

The university has since issued a mea culpa. In a statement, Eric Gislason, interim vice chancellor for research, admitted that "our office did not keep up with" the rapid growth in UIC's research program over the past 4 years, a period in which total funding from the Department of Health and Human Services doubled to its current level of \$80 million. UIC has followed OPRR's orders, says UIC spokesperson Bill Burton. It has put relevant people through educational programs on research ethics

and is revising its ethics procedures, which it plans to submit to OPRR before the end of the month. On 1 October, IRBs will start what is likely to be a yearlong process of re-reviewing all active projects. (See [www.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/oprr/index.html](http://www.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/oprr/index.html) for documentation of university actions.)

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

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—OPRR