

## BIOMEDICAL POLICY

# NIH Wins an Exemption From HHS Peer-Review Overhaul

The peer-review system at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) rests on a simple notion: Fly in a panel of experts and let them decide, face to face, on the best science. It's a trusted system and so widely admired by most scientists that any proposal for improving it can easily be perceived as a threat.

That's what happened this month, after NIH officials received a leaked memo on 1 August from their political bosses at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The memo appeared to call for cheaper ways to obtain expert advice. NIH officials reacted immediately, and within days, an HHS manager was trying to calm the waters, explaining that NIH's scientific programs were not a candidate for such reforms. The memo might have gone unnoticed had it not arrived on the heels of two other recent HHS directives, one clamping down on staff travel and the other cutting back on scheduled salary increases at NIH. The new policy thus seemed to fit a pattern of HHS asserting its management authority over one of its administrative units.

The memo, written by HHS deputy assistant secretary for grants management Terrence Tychan, said that all HHS divisions should try to process grants more efficiently by cutting out face-to-face peer-review meetings. To reduce travel costs and other hassles, it proposed relying on "field readers." Opinions would be gathered by mail, the memo explained, and program managers would consult submitted comments in deciding which projects to fund. Under the plan, HHS offices would implement "standard application review processes," "consolidate and accelerate annual grant planning by linking it to the president's budget," and bring about "standard scoring of competing applications." According to Tychan's memo, the proposals were "favorably received" on 27 July by HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson and were headed for "a realistic imple-

mentation strategy." Because the plan has not been finalized, the memo notes, it "is not to be shared with the world."

But some NIH officials, worried that the plan might take effect without wider discussion, did not keep quiet. The matter reached Wendy Baldwin, NIH assistant director for extramural research. After talking with Tychan, Baldwin says she's confident that



**Cool it.** NIH extramural chief Wendy Baldwin advises staffers not to fret.

would really affect us. I have no indication that this is going to affect the way we do scientific peer review."

One NIH official, who asked not to be identified, remains concerned that the proposed system would give more responsibility to office managers and less to scientists directly involved in research. Another NIH official asserts that NIH's face-to-face reviews are of higher quality than mail reviews, because participants perform better when they must present their views to a live audience of peers. If the memo's policies were adopted, said one institute director, "there would be a revolution" at NIH.

Tychan acknowledges that NIH scientific review is "different and unique." The memo, he said in a telephone interview, was not intended for NIH but rather for a policy group that's "trying to streamline the way we do

grant review at HHS." Their goal is to "make some improvements in the operating divisions" that process HHS awards for research on topics that range from child welfare to Medicare benefits. After talking to Baldwin, he says that "I don't want anybody at NIH to get worried; this is not designed to make vast changes to peer review" at NIH.

NIH runs the largest peer-review operation within HHS, tapping more than 10,000 scientists each year, according to an official in NIH's Center for Scientific Review (CSR). The reviewers—who are reimbursed for travel and lodging and receive \$200 a day for expenses—are grouped by discipline into 150 study sections. They meet roughly three times a year to help sift through the

## THE COST OF PEER REVIEW

Annual budget, NIH Center for Scientific Review	\$55 million
Amount spent on travel, lodging, honoraria (for an estimated 10,000 reviewers)	\$15 million
Cost per grant (based on 32,000 proposals reviewed)	\$1718
Peer-review "tax" (based on a 4-year, \$1 million grant)	0.17%

NIH's peer-review system is not going to be changed. "We have already been engaged in streamlining," Baldwin says. "I don't think [this memo] was talking about things that

44,000 applications NIH receives annually. CSR deputy director Brent Stanfield estimates that each review costs NIH just over \$1700—"very efficient," he claims.

Tychan's interpretation of the memo may put the concerns at NIH to rest. Even if it doesn't, however, the recent dialogue suggests that NIH wields sufficient clout to carve an exemption to a policy edict even before the edict is issued. —ELIOT MARSHALL

## ASTRONOMY

# Pull of Gravity Reveals Unseen Galaxy Cluster

Just as the brightest headlights on the nighttime freeway don't necessarily adorn the heaviest trucks, the brightest objects in the nighttime sky may not be the weightiest. Yet even though it is mass that ultimately determines the structure of our universe, astronomers traditionally flock like moths to bright sources, mainly because those are the ones they can see.

Now astronomers are taking long strides into the ponderous realm of dark matter. Tony Tyson of Lucent Technologies' Bell Labs in

SOURCE: CENTER FOR SCIENTIFIC REVIEW, NIH