

RESEARCH ETHICS

Planned Misconduct Surveys Meet Stiff Resistance

Biomedical societies are criticizing a proposed poll for asking broad questions; an earlier survey was shot down by the White House

The government's Office of Research Integrity (ORI) has built its reputation on high-profile investigations into alleged fraud, attracting both praise and ridicule. Now the 10-year-old arm of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is trying to blaze a trail in understanding, and then preventing, scientific misconduct. But its new direction seems equally controversial: One proposed survey has already been shot down by the White House, and another is under fire from two prominent biomedical research groups.

Last week the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) and the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) sent a strongly worded letter to HHS attacking a proposed survey for straying beyond the bounds of misconduct. "This is a terrible instrument," says FASEB president Stephen Teitelbaum of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, who considers the proposed ORI survey too broad. "The questions are in many ways outrageous [and would produce] uninterpretable and invalid data."

ORI director Chris Pascal defends the proposed survey. It's important to cast a wide net to gain "empirical scientific evidence" on the problems that can undermine research integrity, he says. Speaking last weekend at an ORI conference on research conduct, Pascal suggested that the FASEB/AAMC letter "reinforces ... the importance of reviewing these issues."

The two societies are so far the only ones to react in writing to a notice in the 7 October issue of the *Federal Register* announcing ORI's plans to use a 13-page questionnaire designed by the Gallup organization. It would be sent out early next year to 3000 principal investigators. At its heart is a list of 19 practices: Respondents are supposed to characterize them as misconduct or not and to say whether they or their colleagues have done them. The letter charges that some of the questions are "ambiguous," are "subjective," or "do not in any way fall under the federal definition [of misconduct]." The organizations are particularly incensed by a question asking whether the respondent has ever had any direct evidence of a colleague "citing an article they had not read firsthand."

Noting that federal agencies took years to agree on a terse definition of misconduct—

"fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism"—FASEB and AAMC argue that pollsters should use it. "Have they made up another definition?" demands Teitelbaum. He thinks ORI should not be investigating "issues such as authorship and citation practices, which are the purview of research institutions and not the federal government."

David Korn, AAMC's vice president for biomedical and health sciences, points out that his organization has been cooperating with ORI in encouraging professional societies to pay more attention to research ethics. "The problem is that ORI wants to involve itself in a broader way in what I call the morals of scientific behavior," including authorship, materials sharing, and relationships between investigators and their students. For example, Korn objects to a question about whether respondents have seen anyone "inadequately supervising research subordinates or exploiting them." He says, "These are all important issues, but we do not believe this should be regulated by the government." Although ORI has not said how it plans to use the survey, Korn worries that it might "somehow define a code ... involving all conceivable aspects of scientific behavior."

Pascal acknowledges that FASEB and AAMC "have got a small point about the fact that this was labeled research misconduct [when] it's clearly more" than that. He promises to "fix the ambiguities" in the questionnaire. But otherwise ORI intends to hold its ground. "FASEB wants us to limit questions to the federal definition of misconduct," Pascal says, "but we feel strongly that other issues are important as well." He says that ORI's stance is backed up by a report from the Institute of Medicine this year that "made a big pitch that additional research is needed into research integrity issues."

Science historian Nicholas Steneck of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, who has been working part-time at ORI, thinks scientific societies are in no position to criticize ORI for its attempts to develop guidance on research integrity. "I don't see any effort on FASEB's part," he says, although he admits AAMC has been "supportive." Steneck argues that ORI's responsibility goes far beyond the "narrow [list] of behaviors that fall under the [Office of Science and Technology Policy] definition of research misconduct." Teitelbaum responds that "grant-holding institutions are responsible for policing scientific misconduct. ... This is not, nor should it be, a mission of scientific societies."

ORI has already had to curtail its plans to have a contractor interview people found guilty of research misconduct in hopes of learning more about the circumstances of their erring ways. Mark Davis, now at Kent State University in Ohio, and Michelle Riske of the firm Justice, Research & Advocacy in



Hearsay? Critics complain that a proposed Gallup survey asks questions that can be answered only with secondhand information.

Amherst, Ohio, were funded in 1999 to do a two-part research project. They completed the first part, which involved examining the case files of 104 people found guilty of research misconduct. But the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) drew the line at a poll, saying that it did not include "a representative sample" and that the design was "inadequate." According to Davis, OMB advised that it would be better to interview officials at the institutions involved.

Davis says he was "incredulous" at OMB's intervention. With a team of Kent State researchers, he has now applied for a grant from ORI and the National Institutes of Health to complete the interviews. OMB does not have the same jurisdiction over grants, he says, meaning that it cannot block such an award.

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

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