

# Healy Uses Wit to Woo NIHers

It was, in the words of National Institutes of Health Director Bernadine P. Healy, "an experiment." Healy used the term to introduce last week's first ever NIH Town Meeting—her way of providing scientists working on NIH's Bethesda, Maryland, campus with a chance to voice their numerous complaints about the intramural research program. Healy knew coming in that there would be lots to complain about: Researchers have long been grouching that the \$915-million enterprise is being strangled with red tape and is suffering from neglect by NIH's top brass (*Science*, 1 February, p. 508). So Healy was ready to get an earful, and for 90 minutes she held center stage, turning in a strong performance, using all her charm, enthusiasm, and wit to woo—and seemingly win—a meeting hall packed with skeptical scientists.

For starters, Healy told the crowd what it was waiting to hear: "I'm deeply committed to a better and happier intramural program and am personally willing to do whatever is humanly feasible—provided it's legal—to see that happen." She had few concrete changes to back up the warm words, but she said she was committed to expanding the intramural program and had started looking for practical ways to solve the overcrowding that currently plagues intramural researchers.

There were also caveats. Healy explained that the intramural program's fortunes were inextricably tied to the fortunes of biomedical research overall: The intramural program has been receiving a rock-solid share—about 15%—of the total NIH budget for the past decade, so intramural support will only grow as total NIH support grows. Which is why, she declared, now the cheerleader, that it was time for a shift in national priorities to restore the health of what she described as "the endangered biomedical research enterprise."

Problem is, many of the complaints raised by NIH scientists won't be solved by money alone. Enrico Cabib, chief of the developmental biology section of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), told Healy that scientists were being made to fill out endless forms to prove that they followed appropriate procedures when buying supplies. "We are treated like naughty children who might tell lies," he said. Cabib, who has worked at NIH for 24 years, said the institution might look slick on the outside, but it is showing signs of rot within. "My question is, What are you going to do about it?" That query drew the loudest applause of the day.

"I'd have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to know that procurement is a problem here," Healy responded, but then added that government-wide purchasing rules were to blame. The same goes for another sore point raised by several intramural scientists: the difficulty of making travel plans. "Look at John Sununu," Healy reminded the crowd to get across the point that the travel of all federal employees was receiving increasing scrutiny.

Healy proudly pointed to a recent article in *Fortune* magazine that ranked NIH one of three superstar agencies. She hinted that she was contemplating appealing directly to



**Converts?** Healy delivered right message.

Congress for exemption from some federal purchasing requirements and possibly some travel restrictions as well. If there was any irony that a senior federal official was sounding the ever-popular "get the government off our backs" plea, it was lost on the crowd assembled at NIH. ■ JOSEPH PALCA

## Another Sex Survey Bites the Dust

In July, when Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan responded to pressure from conservative congressmen by killing an approved grant for a 5-year survey of teenagers' sexual behavior, the action raised fears among scientists that other peer-reviewed research at the National Institutes of Health might also be subjected to political litmus tests (*Science*, 2 August, p. 502). Now it appears that those fears were justified.

On 18 September, Edward Laumann, a prominent social scientist at the University of Chicago, learned that the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) was "deferring" funding for one of his grants to study—guess what?—sexual behavior. Like the much larger study killed in July, Laumann's had received outstanding peer reviews—its 1.2 priority rating put it in the top 2% of grants reviewed at the time—and was approved by NIH. And Laumann's project was not targeted at children. But, Laumann reports, NICHD Deputy Director Wendy Baldwin told him that it would be "political suicide" to fund the grant now.

Baldwin was attending a meeting of the NICHD advisory council and couldn't be reached by *Science*, but she sent word through an intermediary, council member Josefina Card of Sociometrics Corp. in Los Altos, California, that she and NICHD Director Duane Alexander made the decision to defer Laumann's grant because if it were put forth now it would certainly be killed. Indeed, the climate in the U.S. these days is hardly warm to sex studies. In the wake of Sullivan's cancellation of the teen survey, the House of Representatives deleted the funding from the fiscal year 1992 budget for a survey of adult sexual behavior that was de-

signed to update information from the Kinsey report, now 40 years old. Then on 12 September, the Senate transferred funds, at least \$7 million, for both the teen and adult surveys from NIH to a "just say no" teen pregnancy prevention program known as the Adolescent Family Life Program.

Laumann had had hints his grant might be in trouble. The letter giving him "official confirmation of general approval" had also stated that NIH was "unable to commit to a specific beginning date at this time." And during the summer, NICHD officials told Laumann his requested starting date of 1 July was being reconsidered and that what happened would depend on what Congress did.

All this is deeply disturbing to public health officials who looked to the three surveys as opportunities to gather information that would help them combat the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Laumann says he finds it ironic that while Congress supports AIDS research, it is reluctant to fund studies that will help public health officials understand the social structures and sexual practices that affect the spread of AIDS.

A more general concern, he says, is that the scuttling of approved research projects "challenges the integrity of the whole system of peer review. It represents a chilling of the scientific discipline." Meanwhile, the NICHD advisory council has drafted a letter to Sullivan, stating that suspension of the teen sex survey sets "a dangerous precedent," and asking him to reconsider. The hope is that if he does, it would alter the political climate so that projects such as Laumann's could be funded. But that, of course, remains to be seen. ■ ANNE SIMON MOFFAT