SCIENCE CONTROVERSY

NIH Wrestles With Furor Over Conference

In trying to solve one political problem last month, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) may instead have touched off a different one. NIH has frozen a $78,000 grant to the University of Maryland—already approved by peer review—for a conference titled "Genetic Factors in Crime: Findings, Uses, and Implications." According to NIH deputy director for extramural research John Diggs, the money is being withheld until conference organizers resolve questions raised about the social implications of holding a meeting on the genetics of criminal behavior.

But University of Maryland law and public policy researcher David Wasserman, who proposed the conference to NIH, believes the suspension is illegal. His university agrees, and has sent a letter to NIH urging the agency to release the money at once. Robert Rosenzweig, president of the Association of American Universities, also thinks that NIH is out of line. "Actions of this kind put a chilling effect on the conduct of science." Rosenzweig argues that if the peer review was appropriately conducted, and the award appropriately made, then NIH is legally bound to release the money. Otherwise, he claims, it says to researchers "don't propose anything that may be controversial or may offend."

Diggs responds that NIH can legally withhold funds if doing so is in the best interest of the government. But regardless of whether there are legal questions, he says, his commitment to the responsible stewardship of federal funds would at least force him to withhold the money until he was satisfied that the social issues had been resolved.

This is not the first time, however, that NIH has withdrawn funding for a politically sensitive grant after it had been awarded. In July 1991, Louis Sullivan, secretary of Health and Human Services, ordered NIH to suspend a peer-reviewed grant to the University of North Carolina for a teenage sex survey because it did not comport with the Administration's policy on abstinence (*Science*, 2 August 1991, p. 502).

The conference on genetics and violence was scheduled to be funded by the ethical, legal, and social issues program of the National Center for Human Genome Research and held from 9 to 11 October. The conference first came in for public criticism on 4 July on the Black Entertainment Television cable channel. Appearing on the program "Lead Story," Peter Breggin, director of the Center for the Study of Psychiatry in Bethesda and a critic of biological psychiatry, stated that "there isn't any scientific evidence that violence is genetic" and argued that the decision to fund the Maryland conference (and a separate Public Health Service initiative on violence) was similar to "the kind of racist behavior we saw on the part of Nazi Germany." Soon after, NIH began receiving telephone calls complaining about the conference, and on 20 July, NIH suspended the funding.

Wasserman, a criminal lawyer by training, maintains that NIH's decision was misguided, in addition to being illegal. Not only did the conference pass peer review, he argues, but also he and his fellow conference organizers "were already working on a constructive response" to the concerns raised by Breggin. Specifically, he says, he and the genome center had organized an advisory panel including sociologist Troy Duster from the University of California, Berkeley, medical geneticist Robert Murray from Howard University, and psychiatric geneticist Eliot Gershon of the National Institute of Mental Health to discuss ways the conference agenda could be modified to avoid the appearance of racism. The panel met last week, but whether they will find a formula to persuade NIH to release the funds remains to be seen.

–Joseph Palca

BIOTECHNOLOGY

NIH to Size Up Growth Hormone Trials

Jeremy Rifkin, a longtime critic of the biotechnology industry, has succeeded in persuading the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to examine safety and ethical aspects of two clinical trials of synthetic human growth hormone (hGH), one of which aims to test the drug's value for making healthy, short children taller. NIH Director Bernadine Healy announced the review in a 24 July letter to Rifkin, saying that NIH plans to convene a "newly constituted and independent data safety and monitoring body" to discuss a range of issues, "including those raised in [Rifkin's] petition." The review panel will report to Healy "within 3 months"—before new patients are added to the trials.

That's a triumph for Rifkin, president of the Foundation on Economic Trends, a Washington, D.C.-based watchdog organization, who had failed to stop the trials in two earlier tries. And it's an unusual step for Healy to order a review of an ongoing trial. But Lance Liotta, the newly appointed head of intramural research at NIH, downplays the significance of the review, saying, "I don't think [there's] a problem or an issue...we're just trying to be as thorough as possible."

The trials, led by Gordon Cutler, chief of developmental endocrinology at NIH, are meant to resolve an issue that researchers have debated ever since the mid-1980s, when bioengineered versions of hGH hit the market for the treatment of serious deficiencies of hGH such as pituitary dwarfism: How much would the drug benefit healthy, short children? "There was a lot of pressure in the pediatric community to do something," says an NIH researcher. So in 1987, NIH began a study of 80 healthy, short children. To date, the investigators have enrolled 37 subjects.

To Rifkin the trial legitimizes a use of a drug that might alter people to fit a social norm rather than to treat a disease. In his earlier efforts to halt it and a concurrent trial of hGH in children with a condition called Turner's syndrome, he raised the specter of leukemia and other alleged side effects of hGH treatment. NIH officials were unimpressed. But Rifkin's third petition presented arguments that some researchers say might carry weight in court if he were to sue the NIH to block the trials.

Rifkin and the petition's cosponsor, the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group, relied heavily on a 1988 case study by the University of Nebraska's Institutional Review Board, which turned down a proposed hGH study in girls with Turner's syndrome. The review board asserted that the study failed to meet a federal requirement that any research "involving greater than minimal risk" have a direct benefit to the subject. But because some children were to receive 200 placebo injections over 18 months as well as radiological monitoring, "we felt that this was a major increase over minimal risk," says Ernest D. Prentice, associate dean of research at Nebraska and a member of the review board. Prentice says he wrote to Healy to distance himself and the other reviewers from Rifkin's petition, but he adds that "we stand by our conclusions."

NIH officials won't say whether they'll be focusing on the same concern as the Nebraska board or on some other issue. As *Science* went to press, an NIH spokeswoman said that the charge to the panel hadn't been finalized. But an NIH official says that one issue to be explored will be whether any more children need to be enrolled in the trials in the first place. And he adds that there's a fundamental issue that has been crying out for study for a long time: "Should society spend its resources on something that really isn't a problem?" he asks. Rifkin and his lawyers are anxious to hear the board's thoughts on that one.

–Richard Stone