

The recent GAO study of peer review at the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health asked the wrong questions. Not asked were the questions, Does the peer-review system encourage the development of new ideas or the reworking of old ones? and Does peer review encourage young scientists to break out in new directions or to remain under the leadership of older scientists? The answers are hard to quantify, but important.

The record of discovery provides a clue to the answers. A list of the five most important advances in the physical sciences in recent years might include high-temperature superconductors, the quantum Hall effect, scanning tunneling microscopy, quasicrystals, and carbon-60. All of these came from small (university research group scale) science, but only one was discovered at an American university. None was supported by the NSF. Perhaps the NSF needs to take a lesson from the management of IBM-Zurich, where two of the five discoveries were made.

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### NIH Research Collaboration

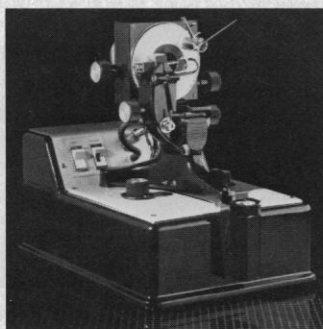
A misquote in Rachel Nowak's recent article about the inventorship questions surrounding the BRCA1 gene (News & Comment, 14 Oct., p. 209) may serve to undermine research collaborations between National Institutes of Health (NIH) scientists and their colleagues in universities and industry. The article attributes to me the statement that "intramural researchers are supposed to have a formal agreement if they enter into any form of collaboration with a partner in industry or university." The statement I actually made was that NIH scientists engage in a broad spectrum of research collaborations and that agreements are necessary for any formal collaboration. It is important to clarify this point to avoid the impression that NIH attempts to formalize all of its collaborative interactions. On the contrary, NIH encourages its intramural scientists to engage in a wide variety of scientific collaborations, including those that, appropriately, remain informal.

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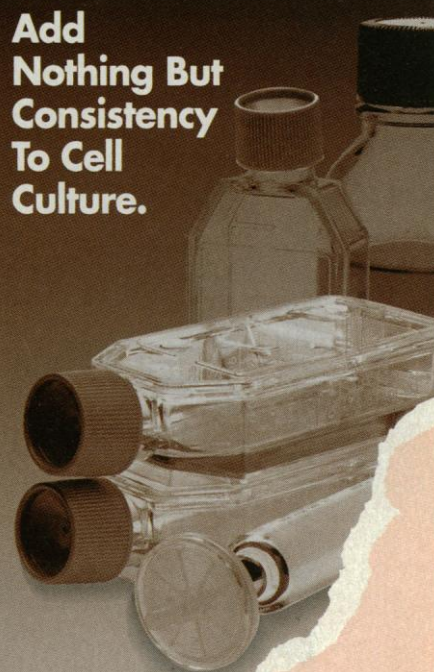
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