

# HHS Intervenes in Choice Of Study Section Members

A grants-review panel on occupational safety has become the latest body to feel the scrutiny of the Bush Administration

The Bush Administration's efforts to filter the scientific advice it receives have spread into peer review itself, according to agency officials and the chair of a panel that examines grant proposals for a controversial area of public health.

In a letter in this week's issue of *Science* (p. 1335), epidemiologist Dana Loomis of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, charges that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is playing politics with the membership of a study section that reviews research grants on physical injuries in the workplace for the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). In the past few months, says Loomis, the department has rejected three people who were proposed by science administrators at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which manages the study section—"at least one" for her support of an ergonomics rule that was overturned last year by the Bush Administration. Knowledgeable agency staffers confirm the account. HHS spokesperson William Pierce declined to discuss specifics, saying that HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson is simply exercising his prerogative to be involved in the choice of advisers.

The department's role in appointing study section members follows other recent changes to federal science advisory committees, which are set up to provide federal agencies with independent scientific advice for policy decisions (*Science*, 25 October, pp. 703 and 732). The NIH peer-review process "really works, and I think meddling with it by inserting any sort of political test really endangers the entire endeavor," says molecular biologist Keith Yamamoto of the University of California, San Francisco, who chaired an advisory panel that helped NIH fine-tune its respected peer-review system. "I can't imagine that this has ever been done before," says Linda Rosenstock, dean of the School of Public Health at the University of California, Los Angeles, who directed NIOSH during most of the Clinton Administration.

As HHS secretary, Thompson oversees both NIH and NIOSH, which is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). According to knowledgeable agency sources, Thompson's staff rejected three of six names put forward by NIH science ad-

ministrators to replace members rotating off the 18-member panel. Thompson's office instead has settled on two members recommended by newly appointed NIOSH Director John Howard. The Safety and Occupational Health study section, which last year handled 140 proposals, helps NIOSH decide how to divvy up its budget for research on workplace-related disease and injury, including musculoskeletal disorders such as back injuries and carpal tunnel syndrome.

NIOSH science is no stranger to politics. In 2000, Rosenstock persuaded NIH to take over management of the study section to shield it from an ongoing, heated political de-



**Heavy lifting.** Pamela Kidd says HHS officials wanted to know her views on workplace safety before appointing her to a review panel.

bate over the cause of injuries in the workplace. The debate was triggered by a proposed rule from the Clinton Administration requiring businesses to do more to prevent and report work-related injuries. Manufacturers and other business interests attacked the rule and the NIOSH-funded science that supported it, and congressional Republicans tried unsuccessfully in 1996 to kill off the agency. NIOSH survived and issued a final rule on the eve of Clinton's departure in January 2001, after an internal panel and two other blue-ribbon panels had found that the scientific evidence bolstered the link between workplace conditions and injury. Even so, a Republican-led Congress killed the rule 2 months later.



As this debate ran its course, the two agencies began fighting over how to manage the committee. NIH wanted to retain final say over the appointments, but NIOSH wanted that authority for itself, in keeping with its responsibility to administer the grants. The dispute became so heated that NIOSH threatened to shut down the study section; in September, NIH told NIOSH to take over its operations. Howard says the two agencies are "working through" their differences.

The rejected panelists—ergonomics experts Laura Punnett of the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, and Catherine Heaney of Ohio State University, Columbus, and Manuel Gomez, director of scientific affairs at the American Industrial Hygiene Association—say they are surprised at the furor surrounding their nominations. Loomis says he had put forward Punnett and Heaney because "we needed the ergonomic expertise badly." Punnett, in particular, has testified publicly in favor of the ergonomics rule and in lawsuits by carpal-tunnel-syndrome patients against keyboard manufacturers. "I was shocked," she says about being rejected. "I think it conveys very powerfully that part of the goal is to intimidate researchers and limit what research questions are asked." Gomez says he is "baffled" as to why his nomination was rejected. Heaney could not be reached for comment.

One nominee who was recently screened for the panel says that she was asked politically charged questions by a member of Thompson's staff. Pamela Kidd, an expert in injury prevention and associate dean of the College of Nursing at Arizona State University in Tempe, says that the staffer called in September and asked if she would be an advocate on certain issues involving ergonomics if appointed to the panel. "I was intrigued and offended at the same time," Kidd recalls. "I purposely answered in a way that would not put me on either side."

The NIOSH study section is an advisory committee whose members are appointed by the HHS secretary, unlike NIH study sections, which are appointed by the NIH director. Rosenstock says she "never had any influence from the secretary" when choosing members for the study section. But Thompson, Pierce says, is adhering to custom while taking a more hands-on approach to managing HHS. "We're doing the job we're being asked to do," says Pierce.

—DAN FERBER