

Cancer institute director's exit leaves NIH in the lurch

Matthew Davis, Washington

Richard Klausner resigned on 11 September as director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to become president of the new Case Institute of Health, Science and Technology. The institute is bankrolled by Steve Case, the founder of America Online (AOL).

Klausner's departure after six years at the NCI accentuates the leadership void at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). The biomedical research agency now lacks permanent directors both at its headquarters and at its largest institute — the NCI accounts for \$3.7 billion of the NIH's \$20.4 billion budget this year.

The positions are vacant at a time when the agency is facing several vexing issues, including the lack of a long-term strategy for managing its recent unprecedented expansion. There is also controversy over the government's role in funding human embryonic stem-cell research and growing concern about patient safety in NIH-supported clinical trials.

Sources inside and outside the NIH had been predicting Klausner's imminent departure for more than a month. They said Klausner and officials at the Department of Health and Human Services, the NCI's parent agency, were at odds over salary increases Klausner had given senior administrative staff and over travel by NCI staff to scientific meetings.



Outward-bound: Klausner wants to be more directly involved with research at the bench.

Klausner says that such issues "were not even a component" of his decision to resign. He attributes speculation about tensions between himself and health-department officials to "the internal rumour mill".

"Whenever an administration changes, these things come and go," he says. "But they were never in my mind as I was determining whether I should stay or go. There is a tendency for people to put forth their own issues when they're trying to explain events."

Klausner adds that he had developed a "good relationship" with the Bush administration. He says that health-department secretary Tommy Thompson had asked him "numerous times" whether he was interested in moving from the NCI to the NIH directorship. He had declined every time, he says, but adds that the discussions never involved an official offer of a presidential nomination. Klausner explains that he decided to say good-bye to the NCI and withdraw from consideration for the NIH directorship because he wants to work more directly with scientific research.

"I love this institution, but the reality is that the NIH director does not get closer to the science — he gets further from the science," Klausner says. "And what I was missing more and more was being close to the content."

At the Case Institute, Klausner plans to use his initial \$100-million budget to generate research projects taking a multi-disciplinary approach to science and health problems, with particular emphasis on innovative uses of technology.

Meanwhile, it remains unclear when the health department will select an acting director for the NCI or when a candidate for permanent director will receive the attention of an obviously distracted White House. (Klausner announced his resignation at a meeting of the NCI's advisory board right at the time of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, making it difficult even for board members to focus on his departure.)

Normally, an institute's deputy director might expect to be named as acting director until a permanent replacement can be found. The NCI's current deputy director is Alan Rabson, the husband of Ruth Kirschstein, acting director of the NIH. But a senior official at the biomedical research agency said that he was unaware of any regulation preventing Rabson, a veteran NCI administrator, from becoming acting director. ■

Top researchers plan to snub fertility conference

Erica Klarreich, London



Antinori: may generate 'an unruly scrum'.

Several of the world's leading experts on reproductive biology have withdrawn from a forthcoming conference in Monte Carlo, saying it has effectively been taken over by Severino Antinori, the Italian doctor best known for his plans to clone humans.

The conference, set for 11–14 October, was originally planned as the third world congress of the International Association of Private Assisted Reproductive Technology Clinics and Laboratories (A PART), a grouping of institutions that conduct fertility treatments.

But on 9 September, the board of A PART withdrew its support for the meeting, saying that Antinori, director of the International Associated Research Institute for Human Reproduction in Rome, and one of the conference organizers, had taken over financial responsibility for the meeting and excluded its other organizers from decision-making.

A PART had hoped that up to 500 fertility clinicians from around the world would attend the meeting. But by 9 September, 41 of the expected 77 speakers had withdrawn, says Wilfried Feichtinger of the Institute for Sterility Treatment in Vienna, and president of A PART.

Ian Wilmut of the Roslin Institute in Edinburgh, Scotland, who led the team that cloned Dolly the sheep in 1997, is among those who cancelled plans to attend the meeting, says Harry Griffin, an assistant director at the institute.

"We viewed the meeting as a way to put the evidence on the limitations of cloning technology directly to the assisted-reproduction community, and create a measured approach to the media," Griffin says. "But when Professor Antinori is involved in media affairs they usually degenerate into an unruly scrum."

The Italian doctor "has turned it into an Antinori congress", says Peter Brinsden, a board member of A PART and medical director of Bourn Hall Clinic, a private infertility clinic near Cambridge in England. "We realized it was going to become a publicity circus."

Antinori responded by saying that the conference would be successful and conducted at a very high scientific level. ■