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No confidence vote for agency head

David Schwartz and the agency he heads are not having much of a summer. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has announced that it will investigate “the management and leadership” of its environmental agency, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. NIEHS director Schwartz is temporarily stepping aside “to eliminate even the perception that the review is anything other than independent and unbiased”. The investigation is expected to take several months.

Schwartz was a controversial figure even before he took the job. In April 2005, after the NIH announced new rules on the kinds and amounts of stock its employees could hold, Schwartz said he would not take the post of director. After confidential chats with NIH head Elias Zerhouni, he felt reassured enough to take the job.

Since then, a cavalcade of charges has been made against Schwartz, many of which came

from the office of Senator Charles Grassley (Republican, Iowa). Grassley accused Schwartz of overspending by \$4 million on his own lab at the expense of other intramural researchers and took exception to the expert-witness role Grassley took in some asbestos-related lawsuits, allowing attorneys to dwell on his credentials. Schwartz has since stopped giving expert testimony. Scientists at the institute also complain that he has disregarded the results of peer review when allocating funds and provoked conflict by attempting to privatize one of the institute’s journals, *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

And this month, officials at NIEHS handed out a form requesting that staff report any phone calls they receive from Congress — the type of form usually used by staff who deal with legislative affairs. On 20 August, Grassley wrote a letter to Zerhouni that said: “Handing this form out to rank and file NIEHS employees during the

course of a congressional investigation could cause these employees to feel that management is attempting to flush out whistleblowers or any other individual assisting me with my inquiry.” However, it is not clear whether the forms went to more than a handful of people.

Scientists in the institute’s intramural research programme have also voted on their feelings about the tumult. Of 206 tenured and tenure-track scientists, 146 participated. Of those, 99 said that the actions and decisions of Schwartz had affected their morale negatively; 91 said that Schwartz did not have their support; and 107 said that they had no confidence in him.

“Morale is at an all time low,” says a senior scientist at the NIEHS, who did not want to be named for fear of retaliation. “A lot of people grew up with this institute and it’s like their home, and he’s come and soiled its reputation.” ■

Emma Marris

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