

MOVERS

Josephine Briggs, director, US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland



2006–08: Senior scientific officer, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Chevy Chase, Maryland

1997–2006: Director, Division of Kidney, Urologic and Hematologic Diseases, NIDDK, Bethesda, Maryland

1993–97: Professor, Departments of Internal Medicine and Physiology, University of Michigan

Since its creation in 1998, the US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) has fallen on tough times. It has struggled for ever-tightening funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), been criticized for a lack of scientific rigour, and suffered the untimely death of its first director, Stephen Straus. Staff hope that a new director will help revive its fortunes.

"Josephine Briggs will gain the staff's confidence and return stability as well as the excitement and enthusiasm needed for the centre to grow," says Ruth Kirschstein, former deputy director of the NIH and acting director of the NCCAM.

Briggs may seem an odd choice to lead the NCCAM, which oversees the development of alternative treatments. She has worked in traditional medicine since receiving her medical degree from Harvard in 1970. In fact, she specialized in renal physiology in order to work in a straightforward, quantitative field. But later career developments would pique her interest in less conventional research fare.

As a chief resident at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, Briggs realized that she wanted more research training to pursue an academic career. She did a postdoc at Yale School of Medicine, working with the early leaders in evidence-based medicine, and spent six years as a research scientist at the University of Munich in Germany. Later, in the University of Michigan's nephrology division, she developed her clinical skills. She and husband Jurgen Schnermann studied the renal hormone system that helps regulate blood pressure.

She was soon made director of the kidney, urological and haematological diseases division of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). While overseeing clinical trials, she noticed large placebo effects and wanted to explore them further. She had started organizing a conference on placebo effects when she discovered that NCCAM director Straus was doing the same; together, they published the conference proceedings and Briggs began to explore mind-body medicine.

She now wants to develop novel clinical-trial designs — able to detect even subtle effects — to test alternative treatments. "Many people are using these therapies, often in large amounts, and the NIH needs to do a good job of researching them," Briggs says. Kirschstein expects Briggs's background will help her better integrate complementary therapies into conventional medicine. ■

Virginia Gewin

NETWORKS & SUPPORT

Take a turn as a rotator

Interested in finding out more about the US government's science-grant review process without giving up your full-time university position? US scientists and researchers in academia and at non-profit organizations might consider taking a year or two off to work as a programme director at the US National Science Foundation (NSF). 'Temporary rotators' learn the federal grant-award process from the inside and review cutting-edge research ideas months, if not years, ahead of everyone else.

The NSF hires 100–150 rotators every year for stints lasting between one and three years, with 30–50 science and engineering positions open at any given time. These temporary programme directors (also called programme officers) are the NSF's main points of contact with the research community. They keep in touch with leading scientists, monitor emerging trends, and make funding recommendations on peer-reviewed grant proposals (see *Nature* **449**, 942–943; 2007).

"Rotators are generally experienced research scientists and engineers," says Joseph Burt, the NSF's director of human-resources management. "This means they have been published and are knowledgeable about developments in their fields."

Younger scientists and minorities are also encouraged to apply. A doctorate and at least six years' academic or non-profit research experience is required. The NSF reimburses the home institutions for the rotators' salaries, which are annualized to the calendar year.

Those interested should talk to current rotators in the field of interest to get an idea of potential staffing needs. "They welcome that contact because they are always looking to develop candidate pools, and one of the best ways is through informal communication," Burt says.

Experience as a peer reviewer often helps. Charles Conover, a physics professor at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, credits that experience for helping him win a rotator post in the NSF's physics division. "I had been involved in the programme both as a peer reviewer and as a grantee, so the people knew who I was and had a pretty good sense that I could do the writing and analysis that the job entails," Conover says. Positions are often posted in society newsletters, and society officials are good points of contact.

"We can bring folk in without a formal competition if we find the perfect fit," Burt says. ■

Ted Agres

POSTDOC JOURNAL

Our strange fellowship

I like humans' highly evolved ability to imagine. But I wish our mental hyperactivity wasn't so often a burden. Because we can imagine the worst happening — and we always do — we have vaccinations and banks and security checks and extensive visa-application processes. Everything requires long-winded translations of meaning and intent.

I've encountered plenty of this in setting up my baboon research in Ethiopia. Being an African working for an American researcher, in Africa, is not as simple as it sounds. My communication and cajoling skills have been tested to the limit while trying to arrange border crossings and behavioural research on our fellow primates. I wonder how we use so many words yet communicate so ineffectively. Why did humans not just stick with a grunt and a smile? In all my mad dashing about I felt the greatest calm at the smiles of greeting from my new employers this morning. Then we started to discuss more about long-term planning, words started flowing and things got complex once again.

For a few more days I will be surrounded by people and our world of words and paperwork and convoluted communication. I think my body has become addicted to the adrenaline necessary to survive — I sometimes like the racing heart. But I can't wait to be surrounded by primates who will simply ignore me while I search for clues about the origins of our strange habits. ■

Aliza le Roux is a postdoctoral fellow in animal behaviour at the University of Michigan.