

NIH goes back to college for peer review

Responding to the need for better expertise to assess multidisciplinary grant applications, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) is inviting a select cohort of researchers to serve as retained reviewers for complex proposals.

The NIH Center for Scientific Review (CSR) in Bethesda, Maryland is taking a page from academic journals and recruiting more than 2,000 scientists to serve on its equivalent of an editorial board. Affiliates of this 'College of CSR Reviewers' will act as first-stage experts for translational and other multifaceted research topics by providing written critiques of up to 12 applications a year.

A second panel will then take the College reviewers' recommendations into consideration when discussing the applications and assigning final priority scores. The two-stage, editorial board-style review, which was piloted over the past two years for some small-business and transformative R01 grant applications,

has so far been met with positive feedback, according to CSR internal evaluations.

"The work that is proposed in grant applications is so much broader than it used to be," says Keith Yamamoto, executive vice dean of the University of California–San Francisco School of Medicine, who co-chaired the working group that evaluated the NIH's peer review system in 2007–2008. "Overall, the [College] idea is good and it moves in the direction of addressing what has become a systemic problem in the way that study sections were conceived."

CSR director Toni Scarpa says that having precommitted reviewers will increase the efficiency and improve the quality of the peer-review process for grant programs, such as the transformative R01s—launched in 2008 to support studies that produce new 'research paradigms'—where broad expertise is required. "Rather than reinventing the wheel, it's better to have a list of really good people who we know are wonderful reviewers," he says.

Membership in the newly formed College is by invitation only. As *Nature Medicine* went to press, the CSR had asked close to 600 researchers to join the club, with roughly 80% of responders accepting the offer. The agency is now sending out around 100 invitations every few days, according to George Chacko, who heads the CSR's bioengineering sciences and technologies integrated review group. The names of all of the College members are scheduled to be posted this month, the agency says.

John Raymond, vice president for academic affairs and provost at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, is waiting by his mailbox with baited breath. "I hope I get an invitation, because it will be an honor and a privilege to serve," says Raymond, who was awarded the CSR's 2009 Marcy Speer award for his years of service on review committees. "The quality of peer review at the NIH is the best in the world, but, like all good things, it can be improved."

Elie Dolgin, New York

Sacked drugs advisor launches private panel

The scientist fired from the British government's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) last year has launched a privately funded scientific committee to advise the public on the risks of drug use.

David Nutt, a psychopharmacologist from Imperial College in London, was dropped from the ACMD in October after his remarks contradicting the government's classification of marijuana reached the press. Last month he announced the launch of his group, the Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs (ISCD).

The new committee has 14 members, four of whom resigned from the ACMD in protest of Nutt's sacking. Five remaining members of the ACMD have expressed interest in straddling the two committees, according to Nutt—and the UK Home Office confirmed that ACMD members may sit on any outside organization. Toby Jackson, a manager of Swiss and British hedge funds, has offered to cover operating expenses of around £150,000 (\$245,000) for the ISCD's first three years, although smaller donations have come in from the public. Nutt says he



A-Nutt-her advisory group: Sacked scientist David Nutt

hopes to add more chemists and at least one physician to the group and that he is in talks with sociologists and epidemiologists to examine the social effects of drugs.

"We need more than just a harm ranking or someone saying that this is the effect of methedrone or BZP [benzylpiperazine] on the human body," notes Danny Kushlick, head of Policy and Communications of Transform Drug Policy Foundation, a UK drugs think tank, "it's a social science, too."

At its first meeting on 14 January, members of the ISCD agreed to investigate the risks of so-called legal highs such as mephedrone, which have garnered attention recently in the UK, and to reexamine drugs such as ketamine. Instead of drawn out debate over drug classification, the team will incorporate multiple-criteria decision analysis, a risk management system used by nuclear waste disposal experts. The government's and the public's perception of the new group will depend both on how delicately the group navigates its first year, and on how media covers it, adds Steve Alexander, a pharmacologist at Nottingham University. "If they're too iconoclastic, it's not going to be easy for them," he says.

In mid-January, Les Iversen, a retired academic at the University of Oxford, UK, was appointed as interim chairman at ACMD. He has reportedly in the past expressed views about marijuana's safety relative to tobacco that were similar to the statements that put Nutt under fire.

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