



Ernie Branson, NIH

Straight talk with... Jeremy Berg

In December, Jeremy Berg announced plans to step down from the helm of the US National Institute of General and Medical Sciences (NIGMS), the \$2 billion branch of the National Institutes of Health charged with funding basic research related to diverse biological processes and diseases. In his seven years as NIGMS director, Berg spearheaded the institute's first formal strategic plan, led efforts to increase workforce diversity and kick-started an open conversation with the scientific community about funding and peer review. In recognition of his many accomplishments, last year Berg was elected to the US Institute of Medicine and awarded a prestigious public service prize from the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. At the end of June, Berg will start up a lab studying protein structures at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as serve as the first associate senior vice chancellor for science strategy and planning for Pitt's Schools of the Health Sciences. Ahead of his move, **Michelle Pflumm** spoke to Berg about his contributions at NIGMS and his plans moving forward.

What initially inspired you to leave your lab at Johns Hopkins and move into government administration in 2003?

After 13 years as a department chair, I had already gotten a big taste of administration and had drunk the Kool-Aid that administration could be a good productive thing for the community. It is something I enjoy—namely, trying to tackle bigger issues and making the institution or the world a better place.

What was the most important change you brought about at NIGMS?

I think the biggest change has been in the communications arena. The idea of really trying to open up real channels of communication with the scientific community and taking advantage of those channels is something I think we made progress on. There is still plenty of room for growth but that is something I hope continues at NIGMS.

In that vein, you posted a lot of data about grant success rates to the

NIGMS Feedback Loop blog. What motivated you to make the funding process more transparent?

I came to NIGMS completely from the outside. I had a steep learning curve trying to understand everything, and I realized that there were things from the outside that seemed really confusing that actually made a lot more sense once you understood what was behind the practices and policies. So, early on I started trying to get as much real information about what was going on out into the community, first with an electronic newsletter and that morphed into the blog.

Do you think these efforts made a difference?

Now we can start asking questions about how various measures of productivity map to the overall funding of the lab. That is something that feeds directly into a policy that NIGMS has had for a long time, which is taking a hard look at applications that come from well-funded laboratories and making sure that putting more money into those labs is really going to be a worthwhile investment compared to spreading the money around a lot more and supporting other labs that might not have other financial backing.

What has been the reaction in the scientific community?

Whenever I attend scientific meetings, people I know, and some that I don't, come up to me and tell me how much they enjoy the blog posts, particularly those that are rich in data. Some of the posts have led to more extended discussions elsewhere in the blogosphere including the post about productivity as a function of laboratory funding. At least some members of the scientific community clearly value these open and data-driven discussions of important policy issues.

What has the NIGMS strategic plan, issued in January 2008, really accomplished to date?

What came out of the strategic planning process was the acknowledgement that small-scale research efforts were still the bread and butter of what NIGMS was about. Larger-scale efforts should be included, but only with a lot of care about what programs were selected and with appropriate oversight structures. This helps ensure that we are getting the most bang for the buck.

At an advisory panel meeting in December, you were the sole dissenting voice opposing a proposed new center devoted to translational research. What was your concern?

One of the things I was concerned about was that this was likely to mean that the National Center for Research Resources would be reconfigured, and that seemed to me to be an issue that would benefit from much more time for discussion and input from the scientific community. It certainly wasn't in opposition to the concept of translational research or trying to make translational research more effective.

Why are you leaving NIGMS?

It's been driven by the situation of my wife [breast cancer researcher Wendie Berg]. At the end of the day, the opportunities at Pitt were so attractive for her and for me, so we decided to move on. It didn't have anything to do with, in any sense, that I was ready to leave NIGMS.

What is on your to-do list before you change jobs?

I hope to get a new strategic plan out—focused just on training and workforce development—and start the implementation. I think we will really address some big issues about the future of scientific training and, therefore, the future of science. The other thing on my agenda for the next six months while I am here is trying to get as much analysis done as I can while I still have access to all this interesting data.