

Soft responses to misconduct

The Federation of American Scientists for Experimental Biology and the Association of American Medical Colleges lead the 'heads-in-the-sand' school on the scientific misconduct issue.

The Office of Research Integrity (ORI) at the US health department continues to plough a lonely furrow as it tries to tackle misconduct. Each investigation that it mounts is complex and problematic for everybody involved (see *Nature* 419, 332–333; 2002). Its administrators have sensibly concluded that its mission will be best accomplished not through investigation and punishment, but by spreading awareness of the importance of ethical conduct throughout the US life-sciences community. Sadly, its efforts are not receiving the support they deserve from US scientific societies and medical schools.

Most recently, the ORI has proposed a survey of National Institutes of Health grant applicants to determine perceptions of various aspects of scientific conduct. Government regulations require the office to publish its proposed set of questions in the Federal Register for comments from interested parties. True to form, scientific societies have lambasted it for allegedly meddling in areas beyond its purview.

In particular, the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) and the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) have attacked the survey (see www.faseb.org) for daring to seek out information on the pervasiveness of low-key unethical behaviour, such as authors citing papers that they haven't read. FASEB and the AAMC say they are indignant that the ORI is seeking to measure misbehaviour that falls outside the scope of the tight 'fabrication, falsification and plagiarism' definition of scientific misconduct that the US federal government adopted a couple of years ago, after several years of low-octane wrangling.

But in a country wracked by allegations of unethical behaviour in business, politics and even in science, perhaps FASEB and the AAMC protesteth too much. For a start, the restrictive definition of misconduct that was accepted by the government represented a lowest-common-denominator approach, hammered out behind closed doors in rooms where FASEB and the AAMC may have been represented but other parties — notably patients' groups, and the taxpayer who foots the bill for the research — were notable only for their absence. The six-year process that derived the definition managed to take the

more radical findings of a commission chaired by the late Kenneth Ryan — which called for a much broader definition of misconduct — and squeeze it back into a bureaucratic strait-jacket wherein routine misbehaviour would go unremarked and unpunished.

The shredding of Ryan's tough prescription made sense to some research leaders at the time but, given the subsequent explosion of allegations of corruption in many quarters of US public life, one has to wonder if it still does. This weekend, for example, the country has been wondering whether to laugh or cry at news that an influential stock-market analyst once issued a 'buy' recommendation for AT&T in an effort to secure the admission of his two-year-old twins into an exclusive Manhattan nursery school. In this climate, scientific leaders would do well to work for transparency in science and for a strong and confident regulator in the ORI. Instead, they seem to want to thwart the watchdog agency at every turn.

The US life sciences have recently benefited from a major expansion in public funding, and have experienced relatively few instances of high-profile fraud. (In an unexpected turn, the most important recent cases of fraud have been in physics, which once considered itself more or less immune to the malaise.) The ORI is politically weak and may appear vulnerable to scientific societies and university administrators who have traditionally viewed it with suspicion.

By keeping track of researchers' perceptions on the need for vigilance with regard to misconduct, the ORI can play a useful role in providing information on standards of research conduct. But by attacking its every move, including efforts to introduce ethics training for graduate students, FASEB and the AAMC give a good impersonation of aged, out-or-touch special interests with something to hide.

The time will come when more powerful agents than the ORI's staff — congressional investigators, for example — will take a close look at standards of conduct in the life sciences in the United States. It is to be hoped that when this happens, scientific societies and the medical schools will be able to show that they have done more than reject scrutiny or accountability at every turn. ■

A turn-up for the National Science Foundation

A law passed by the US Congress shows unprecedented bipartisan support for basic scientific research at the NSF.

This month's passage of legislation that allows for the doubling of support for the National Science Foundation (NSF) over the next five years does not guarantee that the money will actually be forthcoming. That will be determined in annual budget negotiations. But it does mark an unprecedented vote of confidence by the legislature in the NSF, and in the concept of supporting basic scientific research.

The NSF has always been a tough sell in the Congress. It doesn't distribute large sums of money to facilities around the country, and its research programmes — unlike those of, say, the National Institutes of Health — don't directly address real applications that are close to lawmakers' hearts. Rather, it distributes small grants to university researchers who propose the most scientifically interesting work.

It is therefore a remarkable accomplishment — and a great credit

to lawmakers who support the agency, such as House Science Committee chairman Sherwood Boehlert (Republican, New York) — that a law has been passed that may enable the NSF's annual budget to expand rapidly, from about \$4 billion now to \$8 billion by 2008.

The NSF earned this plaudit by consistently funding work on the basis of merit, and maintaining an honest peer-review system and an efficient management structure. Its director, Rita Colwell, has contributed to the momentum behind the bill by thinking big, and making a credible case that the agency can spend more money effectively.

If President Bush signs the bill into law, as expected, and then implements its provisions in his budget proposals, starting with the one released next February, he will truly have dispelled the notion that either his party or his administration is in any sense anti-science. ■