



the safety merits of the various applicants. "If a thorough risk assessment was completed that analysed the relative risks of conducting this research at various sites, then ultimately the DHS would conclude that Texas is the safer location," he says,

arguing that Kansas poses a bigger danger of severe tornadoes.

In light of the GAO report, critics are questioning whether the DHS should go back to the drawing board to reconsider a new offshore site to replace the 55-year-old facility on Plum Island. "A careful and comprehensive assessment of risk has not been made," says Richard Ebricht, a molecular biologist at Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey. "It's time for those policies to be reconsidered."

But many biosecurity experts point out that disease centres in other countries, such as the Canadian National Centre for Foreign Animal Disease in Winnipeg, operate efficiently and safely in mainland locations. "We have the technology to work with these agents safely in containment," says Corrie Brown, a veterinary pathologist at the University of Georgia in Athens who was interviewed by the GAO for its report.

However, disease outbreaks are not unprecedented. In 2001, a leak at an ageing UK animal-research lab in Pirbright led to an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease that required the slaughter of 6 million live-stock. This week, the British government announced a £100-million (US\$165-million) upgrade to the facility. ■

Elie Dolgin

floor of a University of Texas Medical Branch hospital in Galveston, Avi Markowitz, chief of oncology and haematology, agreed to allow the pharmaceutical industry to provide food for the staff. When hospital officials found out, Markowitz says, they told him to stop, as it contravened university policy. "They had no problem at all letting the students, the trainees and the staff go hungry," he says.

At the meeting, similar frustration was palpable. One attendee complained that he couldn't buy a \$12 hamburger for a consultant who had agreed to speak for free. "They're giving us a pro bono service and we're going to ask them to pay for their own lunch?" he lamented.

Stossel and other ACRE leaders argue that stringent policies call into question physicians' integrity. The gift

ban, for instance, suggests that physicians "have a corruption problem", he says.

Nissen acknowledges that academics and industry need to work together, but he says firewalls are needed between the two. "When money becomes involved, it no longer becomes a

"The notion that a physician is automatically tainted by financial interest in a company is obnoxious."

scientific collaboration but a commercial one," he says. "So transparency is an absolute minimum."

Markowitz points out that restrictive rules won't stop misconduct. He says the new conflict-of-interest rules are like "cutting off everyone's hands to prevent stealing".

Rather than focusing on "up-front prohibition", Stossel says, institutions should "emphasize vigilance and punishment".

ACRE's membership is small, with only about 100 people. And the group has not yet decided whether to allow industry employees as members.

For now, at least, funding comes from its \$200 annual membership fee. Accordingly, the kick-off gathering was far from opulent. At lunchtime, participants gathered at folding tables to eat ham sandwiches and potato crisps.

Weber says the next step is to come up with a proactive code of conduct outlining ethical interactions. "If we can't say what would be appropriate," he says, "then we don't have a position at all." ■

Cassandra Willyard



GOT A NEWS TIP?

Send any article ideas for Nature's News section to newstips@nature.com

K. CAMPBELL/GETTY

European body told to cut free

The European Commission must make "immediate corrections" to the running of the European Research Council (ERC) or risk the body suffering a "deadly blow", an expert review has found.

On 23 July, a panel led by the former president of Latvia, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, published a review of the ERC — the first pan-European initiative to fund frontier research solely on the basis of excellence.

The ERC was established two years ago and is administered by an executive agency under the commission's control. The panel describes the council's management as a source of "great frustration and low-level conflict".

It recommends recruiting a top scientist with managerial experience from outside the commission to run the executive agency, replacing the commission's current appointee. The review says that existing rules preventing such an appointment should be "urgently remedied".

"Cumbersome" regulations and financial controls imposed on the ERC could prevent the council becoming a world-class institution, the review says. Sources of frustration include funding coming as contracts rather than grants, requiring researchers to document in detail time spent working on ERC-funded projects (see *Nature* 460, 440–441; 2009). The review calls for the ERC to be allowed to award grants, giving researchers greater flexibility.

Rules requiring reviewers to provide formal identification discourage participation, the review says. It calls on the commission to put in place rules based on "trust and not suspicion and mistrust".

The review says these changes must be made over the coming year. A follow-up review should take place in 2011 to ensure improvements have been made. If they have not, the ERC should become independent from the commission, the panel says.

Janez Potočnik, the research commissioner, said in a statement that the recommendations "coincide with [the] commission's own conclusions" on the ERC. "I believe that we will be able to respond positively to the substance of most recommendations," he says.

The commission's official response to the review is due in October. ■

Natasha Gilbert