

## Contacts

**Publisher:** Ben Crowe

**Editor:** Paul Smaglik

**Marketing Manager:** David Bowen

### European Head Office, London

The Macmillan Building  
4 Crinan Street  
London N1 9XW, UK  
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4961  
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996  
e-mail: [naturejobs@nature.com](mailto:naturejobs@nature.com)

### Naturejobs Sales Director:

Nevin Bayoumi (4978)

### UK/ RoW/ Ireland:

Andy Douglas (4975)  
Nils Moeller (4953)  
Irene Vigila-Atton (4944)

### Scandinavia/ Spain/ Portugal:

Evelina Rubio Håkansson (4973)

**Natureevents:** Silje Opstrup (4994)

### France/ Switzerland:

Amelie Pequignot (4974)

### Advertising Production

**Manager:** Billie Franklin  
To send materials use London  
address above.  
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4814  
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996  
e-mail: [naturejobs@nature.com](mailto:naturejobs@nature.com)

### Naturejobs web development:

Tom Hancock

### Naturejobs online production:

Niamh Shields

### European Satellite Office

**Germany/ Austria/ Italy/  
The Netherlands/ Belgium:**

Patrick Phelan  
Tel + 49 89 54 90 57 11  
Fax + 49 89 54 90 57 20  
e-mail: [p.phelan@nature.com](mailto:p.phelan@nature.com)  
Sharon de Weert  
Tel + 44 (0) 20 7843 4970  
e-mail: [s.deveert@nature.com](mailto:s.deveert@nature.com)

### US Head Office, New York

345 Park Avenue South,  
10th Floor, New York, NY 10010-1707  
Tel +1 800 989 7718  
Fax +1 800 989 7103  
e-mail: [naturejobs@nature.com](mailto:naturejobs@nature.com)

### US Sales Manager: Peter Bless

### Japan Head Office, Tokyo

MG Ichigaya Building (6F),  
19-1 Harakatomachi,  
Shinjuku-ku,  
Tokyo 162-0841  
Tel +81 3 3267 8751  
Fax +81 3 3267 8746  
**Asia-Pacific Sales Director:**  
Rinoko Asami  
e-mail: [rasami@naturejpn.com](mailto:rasami@naturejpn.com)

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## Reversal of fortune

**A** new rule that severely limits employees of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) from pursuing outside income could have a cooling effect on recruitment to its 18,000-member workforce. It could also have repercussions farther afield, as institutions choose either to adopt a similar policy or to exploit it to recruit scientists who might have headed for the NIH.

Rules about accepting outside income, including pharmaceutical and biotech stock for consulting work, were relaxed in 1995 under the NIH's then-director Harold Varmus, in part to increase recruitment of high-level scientists. The revision came under fire last year thanks to a few dozen instances in which scientists apparently didn't disclose potential conflicts of interest. Both Varmus and current NIH director Elias Zerhouni said last year that only senior staff, such as individual NIH institute directors, should be banned from receiving outside income.

But the latest rule change, announced last week, marks another reversal, because it extends the ban to all employees. Zerhouni has said this may have some effect on recruiting top talent — the institute's campus in Bethesda, Maryland, is the biggest employer of life scientists in the greater Washington DC area (see page 664). And the move seems counterintuitive as Zerhouni's 'roadmap' for the NIH calls for an increase in collaborations between academia and industry.

Some NIH employees have said that enforcing the existing system would have been fairer than exercising strict limits on thousands of scientists who have played by the rules. In the past decade or so, it has become common for scientists to live professionally in several worlds at once. This arrangement creates better career paths for scientists. But for the immediate future, for scientists wanting to work at the interface between the business and academic worlds, such a path won't lead to Bethesda.

**Paul Smaglik**  
Naturejobs editor



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