

## The science police

**The publication of a controversial study by a US National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded researcher suggesting a link between the Tea Party and the tobacco industry has brought the NIH under fire by Congress. But strict policing of NIH grantees would be a waste of resources and a setback to scientific inquiry.**

In February, a group of scientists led by tobacco policy researcher Stanton Glantz from the University of California–San Francisco published a peer-reviewed paper in the journal *Tobacco Control* (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2012-050815>). This study uncovered a possible financial link between the tobacco industry and two organizations that would go on to support the Tea Party, a right-wing political party in the US, when it formed in 2009.

Since the paper's publication, its merits with regard to its methods and conclusions have been hotly debated in the partisan press. Criticism of the study ratcheted up on 5 March, when conservative members of Congress grilled NIH director Francis Collins at a public hearing about how Glantz could use NIH funds to conduct a study that, they felt, had a clear political agenda in sullyng the reputation of the Tea Party. At that congressional hearing and in a letter to Collins, they pushed for more rigorous oversight of the day-to-day research activities of NIH grant recipients, ostensibly to avoid funding of studies that these politicians felt would waste taxpayer money or be of a potentially partisan nature.

Congress annually oversees the overall NIH budget allocation and can direct the NIH to increase or decrease funding for particular research fields. However, given the current climate of declining scientific funding, government resources should not be diverted from research to add another layer of review to the current grant evaluation process or to undertake ongoing oversight of the day-to-day research activities of grantees doing work that could be considered politically sensitive. Moreover, political interference with scientific inquiry is dangerous if it serves to suppress the examination of particular questions, to prevent the publication of data that may be controversial or to stop investigators from interpreting data in ways they feel are scientifically appropriate.

In the case of Glantz, his grant proposal expressly stated a plan to examine newly released tobacco industry documents to determine the relationships of that industry with any organizations that may share its goal of blocking tobacco control legislation. In the study, the two groups that Glantz concluded had future ties to the Tea Party, Americans for Prosperity and Freedomworks,

have been champions of smokers' rights and have fought against government interventions such as taxes on tobacco and antismoking laws.

That Glantz's research had the potential to generate politically sensitive findings should not have come as a surprise to the NIH. The goal of the research to uncover links of the tobacco industry to various organizations was clear from the submitted grant, which made it through the NIH grant review process.

Many findings in a number of research fields do have clear political repercussions, and it would be a mistake for the NIH to stifle scientific inquiry because of what a researcher may find in the course of a study. It would likewise be inappropriate for the government to prevent scientists from pursuing research questions that may be political hot-button issues, as has happened in the past.

For example, NASA (US National Aeronautics and Space Administration) climate scientist James Hansen has claimed that, throughout his career, government employees at NASA and at the White House edited his scientific interpretations of data and limited his communications with the press to downplay what he believes to be the strong link between greenhouse gases and global warming (*Nature* **439**, 896–897, 2006). In another case, Congress in 2003 expressed concerns about NIH grants looking into HIV transmission and prevention in prostitutes because they felt those grants seemed to legitimize the sex trade (*Science* **300**, 403, 2003). These examples demonstrate a potential for political bias in funding decisions that could occur as a result of government intervention.

Researchers have a responsibility not to fit their own data into a political agenda, and oversight achieved by peer review and adherence to NIH guidelines is necessary to maintain ethical standards in science. But scientists should be able to pursue research wherever the findings may lead, because serendipitous discovery is not possible when scientific questions are circumscribed by politics. Suppressing research that could lead to controversy is antithetical to the scientific enterprise and must be resisted for novel findings to emerge that can change the course of human health.