



AAAS CEO QUOTES

FRIDAY, JULY 24, 2009

7-24-09: AAAS CEO describes political interference with health research as "extremely dangerous"

AAAS Chief Executive Officer Alan I. Leshner, Ph.D., executive publisher of the journal Science, offered the following comment regarding a proposed amendment to the House Fiscal Year 2010 Labor, Health, and Human Services and Education Appropriations bill. The amendment, set forth by U.S. Congressman Darrell Issa (R-California), reportedly was scheduled for discussion on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives on Friday, July 24, 2009.



Dr. Leshner responded as follows:

"Public health research, such as efforts to prevent HIV/AIDS, should not be turned into a political issue. Understanding the factors that affect disease transmission is vitally important to improving human health worldwide. Rep. Darrell Issa's proposed amendment would rescind funding for three potentially important efforts to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. It further would undermine a rigorous peer-review system that the U.S. National Institutes of Health has in place to assess the scientific merit of grant proposals. We must not let political objectives or moral ideology trump scientific evidence, or the goal of improving global public health. It's extremely dangerous when politicians substitute their views for those of public health and scientific experts in deciding which science should be done."

The Coalition to Protect Research Integrity has provided the following information regarding the three grants in question:

- 1) Substance Abuse Use and HIV Risk Among Thai Women

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Grant Number: 1R21DA026324-01A1

The proposed collaboration study between Ms. Usaneyya Perngparn, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand and Dr. Nemoto, Public Health Institute, California, will investigate the sociocultural contexts of HIV risk behaviors and drug use among Thai female and male-to-female transgender (kathoey) sex workers in Bangkok. Research is currently needed to develop and adapt HIV prevention models that take into account sociocultural factors so that the further transmission of HIV and sexually transmitted infections can be averted. Participation in these types of studies also can provide a way for persons suffering from the health consequences of illicit sexual activity to receive treatment while contributing to our knowledge of prevention and treatment outcomes in these populations.

2) HIV Prevention for Hospitalized Russian Alcoholics

Grant Number: 5R01AA016059-03

Investigators are adapting a prevention approach that has been demonstrated to be effective in decreasing high-risk HIV related behaviors in the U.S. for use in Russia, a country with a rapidly expanding incidence of HIV. The approach, called Health Relationships Intervention, involves the development of a plan of action for each client to increase social support and reduce high-risk behaviors. This includes the disclosure of information to family and friends on the client's health, social needs and condition thereby assisting the client in maintaining low risk behaviors.

3) Venue-based HIV and Alcohol Use Risk Reduction Among Female Sex Workers in China

Grant Number: 1R01AA018090-01

Research has provided evidence linking alcohol-related, high risk sexual behavior with HIV and other sexually-transmitted infections. Research has also provided rich descriptions of social, cultural, and economic contexts in which people engage in alcohol-related sexual risk behaviors. More specifically, alcohol use characteristics (e.g., binge drinking) have been linked with sexual risk-taking that occurs in a range of high risk environments. The investigators have proposed a 5-year study to develop, implement, and evaluate a theory-guided, multiple components, and venue-based HIV and alcohol use risk reduction intervention among commercial sex workers (FSWs) in China.

Additional information regarding the NIH peer-review process is provided below:

The NIH uses a rigorous peer review process to determine which grant

applications to fund. NIH's scientific peer review process is the gold standard for determining the quality and relevance of grant proposals.

Thousands of scientists each year submit applications to the NIH requesting funding for their scientific proposals. Applications are evaluated initially by the NIH's Center for Scientific Review and peer review groups composed of scientific experts from around the U.S. and the world. These groups (also called "study sections") assess and rate the scientific and technical merit of the proposed research or training projects.

Projects reviewed in a particular session are scored and ranked in relation to each other. The applications are then assigned to one of the 27 institutes and centers at NIH. A second level of peer review is conducted by the NIH National Advisory Councils of the respective funding Institutes or Centers, which are composed of both scientists from the research community and public representatives. These councils ensure that the NIH receives advice from a cross-section of the U.S. population in its deliberation and decision-making. This system ensures that research conducted and supported with taxpayer dollars is scientifically meritorious and serves to improve the lives of all people equally. Approximately 70 percent of meritorious, scientifically valid proposals do not receive funding through this process. The grants that receive funding, however, are the best in their fields.

In response to previous congressional concerns about whether sexual health research should be funded by the agency, NIH reviewed the entire NIH sexuality portfolio in 2004. That investigation found that all of the NIH grants in areas of sexual health met the rigorous standards of scientific and ethical quality, that they were not funded out of proportion to the public health burden of these diseases, and that the merit review system had been followed.

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