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NIH Director Upholds Scientific Merit of Controversial Sexuality Grants

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Bethesda, Md.

After an internal review, the director of the National Institutes of Health said on Monday that he stands behind the scientific merit of a group of controversial grants, some dealing with sexual behavior and AIDS, that drew questions and criticism from some members of Congress last fall.

The director, Elias A. Zerhouni, said the review confirmed that each of the grants examined was worthy of research and NIH support. "When we looked at the public-health relevance, there was no question that these projects should have been funded and should continue to be funded," he told his advisory committee.

Scientists have worried that the review represented an unprecedented intrusion into the agency's peer-review process, even though a Congressional committee said the review resulted from a misunderstanding ([The Chronicle](#), November 7). A list of about 190 grants financed by the agency was prepared last year by a conservative group that called the grants objectionable and a misuse of taxpayer dollars. The list was distributed to members of the Energy and Commerce Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, some of whom referred to it during a hearing in early October.

The list was sent to the NIH by a committee staff member. But the committee's spokesman later called that a mistake, and said the committee was not formally requesting the NIH to respond.

Nevertheless, the NIH decided to examine the grants, and senior officials of the agency questioned program managers about the projects' details. The agency is planning to send a letter summarizing the findings and Dr. Zerhouni's conclusion to Congress shortly.

On Monday, Dr. Zerhouni specifically defended one of the studies, which involved health problems among so-called two-spirit American Indians. The term refers to people who consider themselves under American Indian cultural tradition to be both male and female.

The grant provided \$522,021 to a researcher at the University of Washington at Seattle in the 2002 fiscal year. The study's goals included studying increased rates of HIV, substance abuse, and mental illness among these people. "This was the first attempt ever to study a stigmatized community, the relationship of two spirits within the culture of tribal culture," Dr. Zerhouni said.

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