

Dayton (OH) Daily News

### **Sex study critics denying reality**

Editorial

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If the Traditional Values Coalition looks hard enough, it will find that the National Institutes of Health has funded questionable studies.

That's a certainty; the NIH is a \$23 billion agency. With that kind of spending, you can be sure mistakes have been made.

But the politicians can't run scared just because a religious organization that has a simplistic view about how to promote public health is grabbing headlines.

The coalition claims that nearly \$100 million has been spent on research "which reasonable people, even those with no particular religious or political perspective, would view as prurient."

Despite the coalition's absolutism, others can beg to disagree. Wright State University, for instance, has a five-year \$2.5 million grant that is among those the coalition objects to. That research is focused on the sexual habits of teens using the potentially deadly "club drug" Ecstasy.

The coalition, which says it represents 43,000 churches, may not like it that some teenagers are popping the drug and then having sex--unprotected or otherwise. But they are, and police confirm that the drug is hugely popular at raves and clubs.

WSU researchers aren't asking about the users' sexual habits because they're curious. The goal is to learn what kids are doing so they can be warned about the dangers of their habits; so public education campaigns against the drug can be crafted; so medical professionals can know what they're dealing with when Ecstasy victims come through their doors.

The coalition isn't really interested in the specific grants. Its agenda is more political than practical. In writing to a congressman who challenged the complaints, the coalition's director charged that "the NIH has become nothing more than another federal ATM for grant traffickers--a National Endowment for the Arts with a chemistry set."

C'mon.

And just to show that this is not an isolated comment, Andrea S. Lafferty, executive director of the organization, also wrote: "If, as you argue, these projects are being directed from the 'most distinguished' universities in America, my suspicion is that they are operating out of the basements of some fraternity houses rather than any legitimate science buildings."

The NIH is a premier research institution. Ms. Lafferty's charge is beyond harsh. It's overheated baloney.

If goofy grants have been let, then the NIH has to take its lumps. But even some bad decisions are not a reason for politicians--as opposed to scientists--to micromanage the guidelines for what constitutes responsible research. That's beyond their arena.

The coalition's ire is aimed largely at studies having to do with sexual habits and AIDS. Its view is simply that there's much about these subjects that it would rather not know.

Fine, but that mindset denies that AIDS is a public-health threat, as are sexually transmitted diseases. Knowing how to combat these diseases requires asking questions and understanding things that might offend some people.

That doesn't mean, though, that this work is poor science.