



---

**EDITORIAL**

# Sex in the Capital City

advertisement

November 29, 2003

Some Congress members have overstepped their legitimate role of overseeing federally funded scientific research by threatening to cut off money for nearly 200 grants to study sexual behavior. The funding is channeled through the National Institutes of Health.

This month, pressure from House Republicans led Northwestern University to proceed with an investigation into how one of its professors had used taxpayer funds to study human sexual arousal. And last month, a coalition of conservative church groups said it was asking the Justice Department to investigate whether the NIH was wrong to fund a series of what the coalition called "smarmy projects" aimed at documenting the behavior of prostitutes, intravenous drug users and others at high risk of spreading sexually transmitted diseases.

These attacks might be written off as noise by fringe groups were they not coming on the heels of the near-passage in the House four months ago of an amendment by Rep. Patrick J. Toomey (R-Pa.) that would have yanked federal funding from four NIH research grants on sexual behavior. Toomey's attempt to kill the grants failed, but just barely.

In a bombshell of an editorial published in this week's edition of the usually sedate *Science*, Alan I. Leshner, the journal's executive publisher and the CEO of the American Assn. for the Advancement of Science, lashes out at "moralizers who are trying to muck with U.S. science again." Legislators, Leshner believes, have moved from "healthy scrutiny ... to irresponsible attack."

"The moral judges proposing the de-funding don't like the fact that HIV is spread through sex and they believe that drug addicts have made bad personal choices that have led to addiction," Leshner says. But, as Leshner reasonably asks, "Is their disapproval of these behaviors a justification for stifling research on the diseases that result? Do they suppose that some form of national denial will make these problems go away?"

There's nothing wrong with Congress wanting to hold scientists fully accountable to the taxpayers who fund their research. Though the nation's haughtiest scientists might want to have nothing to do with the hoi polloi, the fact is that science usually advances best because of, not in spite of, public scrutiny.

The true concern of legislators now trying to micromanage the NIH's budget is not the relatively tiny amount of taxpayer money spent on this research. Rather, they are trying to impose ideologies and religious doctrines on scientific research. It's reasonable to disapprove of the behavior that leads to disease but dangerous to restrict the inquiry that leads to health and science breakthroughs.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at [latimes.com/archives](http://latimes.com/archives).



[Click here for article licensing and reprint options](#)

---

Copyright 2003 Los Angeles Times