



## Editorial


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# No Sex Research Please, We're American

By [Richard Gallagher](#)

During a budget debate in the US House of Representatives on July 10, Rep. Patrick Toomey (R-Pa.) proposed an amendment to defund five NIH grants,<sup>1</sup> four of which would examine aspects of human sexuality. "Who thinks this stuff up?" Toomey asked.

His amendment was barely defeated, 210 to 212. Combined, the threatened studies will receive \$1.5 million (US) next year.

Specifically, the money will be spent on studying American Indian and Alaskan transgendered individuals, the sexual habits of older men, Asian prostitutes and masseuses in San Francisco, and mood arousal and sexual risk-taking.

A little later, the theme was replayed on a grander scale.<sup>2</sup> A conservative advocacy group, which represents more than 43,000 churches, circulated a list of 200 "questionable" NIH grants that add up to a total funding package of around \$100 million. Again, the studies related to sexual behavior, AIDS, and risk-taking. The Traditional Values Coalition (TVC) has provided a blacklist of grants to Congress and the Justice Department, plus demands to take steps against "NIH misconduct." At press time, it was unclear what action, if any, will be taken.

Most scientists would welcome in-formed debate with other constituencies about the boundaries for research and the priorities for science funding. After all, science needs public support; besides, developing health programs and treating sexual problems require much and diverse, research. So should we view these developments as positive? I would, if the critics had cogent arguments to back up their criticisms.

They raise three types of objections. One is moral. "Nearly \$100 million dollars had gone to research many projects [that] reasonable people, even those with no particular religious or political perspective, would view as prurient," according to TVC

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executive director Andrea S. Lafferty.<sup>3</sup> Is she accusing researchers of being, to provide a dictionary definition, "uneasy with desire; having a lascivious curiosity?" I hope not.

The second is the purported culpability of the National Institutes of Health. "Who decides to actually fund these sorts of things? Well, unfortunately, the NIH has done so," said Toomey. Lafferty took the criticism further. The TVC report "suggests that the NIH has become nothing more than another federal ATM for grant traffickers, a National Endowment for the Arts with a chemistry set," she wrote, referring to controversy over federal funding for art projects that some deemed prurient or offensive. But none of the critics produced evidence of malfeasance: All the projects that received support were subjected to the normal, rigorous peer-review process.

The third argument is that this work is of no relevance to public health. According to Toomey: "There are so many far more important, very real diseases that are affecting real people." But let's not forget the AIDS pandemic, the growth in sexually transmitted diseases, and the dangers of the volatile mix of drugs, sex, and disease. Research on these topics is necessary, however uncomfortable some may find it. This said, some of the NIH-funded, semisociological projects do appear to have little to offer public health; the Alaskan transgendered project comes to mind.

It would be very useful if NIH applications contained a 100-word, plain-English section called, "Why this is important to the US taxpayer." Intelligent, thoughtful discussion might ensue, rather than the situation that we have now--polarization and the entrenchment of a position in some quarters that is best described as: "No Sex Research, Please! We're American."

The sexual mores farce, *No Sex Please, We're British*, was a long-running stage comedy in London's West End. "No Sex Research, Please! We're American" also could become a farce, but of a different type: devoid of humor, fraught with danger.

**Richard Gallagher, Editor**  
([rgallagher@the-scientist.com](mailto:rgallagher@the-scientist.com))

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