



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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HUMAN RESOURCES
DIVISION

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Gerald L. Klerman, M.D.
Administrator, Alcohol,
Drug Abuse, and Mental
Health Administration
Department of Health,
Education, and Welfare



Dear Dr. Klerman:

We have surveyed the research program at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA). Our efforts concentrated on NIMH's priority-setting process for mental health research, procedures for monitoring research grants, and mechanisms for disseminating research results. We spoke with agency officials knowledgeable in these areas and reviewed appropriate records including past and present planning documents. We also discussed our preliminary findings with NIMH officials. We made no attempt to judge the scientific merit of the research performed under the program.

Four NIMH divisions award grants for mental health research; three others, comprising NIMH's intramural program, conduct research within NIMH. No one, however, is in charge below the level of the NIMH Director. The Director is assisted by an 18-member Research Advisory Group which meets weekly to help define the NIMH research mission and develop research policy.

Based on the results of our work, we believe that the NIMH research program could be improved through (1) the development of a formal comprehensive research plan and annual report of research activities, (2) the establishment of NIMH-wide grant monitoring procedures, and (3) the creation of a formal research dissemination strategy and a process to more adequately evaluate dissemination efforts. We are aware that NIMH is beginning to make improvements in these areas by, for instance, drafting NIMH-wide final reporting procedures and awarding contracts to evaluate monitoring and dissemination activities, but we believe more could be done.

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PLANNING AND PRIORITY-SETTING
FOR MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

NIMH's planning and priority-setting system is not tied into the budget process, it does not recognize ongoing work, and its forward plan does not give specific long-term goals and objectives. To better account to its various constituencies, NIMH should consider adopting a more formal and comprehensive research planning and priority-setting method than its current method which focuses only on new initiatives.

In its planning and priority-setting processes for mental health research, NIMH has many interested constituencies. Congress; the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW); NIMH staff; various advisory and citizens groups; and the scientific community all have an impact on the priority system. The funds available to satisfy these various interests have not kept up with inflation. According to NIMH, funds available for research grants experienced a 53 percent decrease in buying power between 1967 and 1976.

NIMH's present vehicle for setting its research priorities for new initiatives is the forward plan. This is a 5-year planning document which focuses primarily on the first year of the planning period. It is generally finalized about a year before the beginning of the 5-year period. In the past, long-range statements in the plans have been brief and general. For instance, the 1977-1981 plan identified as an absolute NIMH priority the doubling by the end of the planning period of grant-supported research on the major mental illnesses and basic physiological and developmental studies. An NIMH official told us that the 1979-1983 forward plan now in development will contain more long-range planning statements.

Other than the above statements, the only research priorities laid out in the forward plan are those for new initiatives for the coming year. NIMH will pay for these new initiatives with funds received over and above the previous year's appropriation. Fiscal year 1976 was the first year that NIMH tried to tie the forward planning process into the budget; however, funds for new initiatives were not received until fiscal year 1977. Consequently, fiscal year 1977 was the first year that the forward planning process had a direct relationship to the funds actually budgeted.

The basic premise of NIMH's planning for other than new initiatives is to maintain a balanced program of mental health research. However, the forward plan, which is the only formal research planning document cutting across the Institute's various divisions, does not set priorities or otherwise plan for NIMH's ongoing program. Rather, decisions on the allocation of funds are made by the Director using the budget process, weekly meetings of the Research Advisory Group, and the results of deliberations of the peer review groups which analyze the scientific merit of grant applications throughout NIMH.

The funds involved in the ongoing program where projects compete for dollars are significantly greater than those received for planned new initiatives. In fiscal year 1976, NIMH awarded \$28 million for grants competing in the ongoing program not planned for in the forward plan, but it received no money for new initiatives identified in the forward plan. In fiscal year 1977, there was \$23 million planned for the base program and \$10 million for new initiatives. Not included in these figures are the bulk of NIMH's research funds--those for multi-year grants or intramural research (about \$61 million)--which do not compete for funding each year.

Recently there has been some discussion within NIMH on what a priority means and whether more overall assessment of research is needed. Some officials have suggested that NIMH issue an annual research report summarizing accomplishments and describing the state of mental health research. We believe the suggestion is a good one. Such a report could provide an accounting to various interest groups of what the mental health research issues are and what progress NIMH is making with its research dollars. In addition, compiling the report would force greater communication and coordination among program staff. In short, such a document would fill a need for an assessment of research broader than the current practice of formally planning for new initiatives only.

GRANT MONITORING AND REPORTING PROCEDURES

NIMH does not have an Institute-wide system of grant monitoring or procedures for controlling the receipt and disposition of interim and final research reports. As a result, there is no assurance that grantees are performing

research and reporting their findings in accordance with the terms of the research grants.

Grant monitoring

NIMH has no specific written guidelines telling staff how they should monitor grants. The executive secretary of the Research Advisory Group believes that such procedures would be hard to devise since different types of research sponsored by NIMH require different degrees of monitoring. As it is now, a staff member responsible for monitoring grants in one division maintains contact with each of his grantees usually through one progress report and one phone call a year; other divisions require staff to contact grantees once every 6 months. Some NIMH divisions require a narrative or a completed form documenting all contacts with grantees; one division requires no written documentation. Individuals we spoke to suggested a need for criteria on when site visits are warranted and the extent to which other monitoring should take place.

We believe that the inconsistency in grant monitoring may be contributing to certain problems identified by NIMH in response to a May 1977 directive from the Secretary to correct grant deficiencies. One of the problems identified was that NIMH often does not notice inadequate project performance or deviations from approved project plans for long periods of time. Furthermore, Macro Systems, Inc., reported in April 1977 that some final research reports submitted to NIMH present principal findings which appear to be clearly peripheral to the relevant NIMH division's interest in the grant. While acknowledging the scientific latitude grantees must have, the contractor also pointed out the need for researchers to be accountable to the agencies supporting research.

NIMH attributes poor monitoring to reductions in funds and staff available for site visits. Its plan for improving the situation involves devoting more of its travel budget to site visits but does not address the question of developing consistent monitoring procedures. ADAMHA, however, given adequate staff would propose documenting grant review and identifying types of grants and grantees to be routinely site visited.

For fiscal year 1977, NIMH's plan for evaluating its own programs had proposed a 6-month contract which "would

provide the groundwork--now sorely absent--needed to direct the Institute's approach to its research grant monitoring practices." The contract, however, will not be issued. Instead, NIMH plans to extend its contract on final reporting to include monitoring of social science programs. Also NIMH will initiate an in-house study to redesign the proposed monitoring contract.

Grant reporting procedures

NIMH has had a recurring problem with final project reports. NIMH officials informed us that many of the reports are delinquent; others have been submitted to the program staff and never transferred to the official grant files. This situation apparently results from each NIMH division going about its final reporting duties independently, with little overall direction or coordination. NIMH has issued draft guidelines establishing a consistent course of action for handling final reports. Among other things, the guidelines propose a central unit which will serve as a focal point for assuring that grantees meet all reporting requirements.

As a result of the May 1977 directive to correct grant deficiencies, NIMH circulated a questionnaire to its staff on how grants are handled. While NIMH had not fully analyzed the responses at the time of our survey, they plan to do so in the future.

We believe that this analysis and the other planned NIMH initiatives described above are steps in the right direction. Further, we believe that the fact that these inconsistencies exist points to the need for continuous overall direction and coordination of the research grants program.

DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH INFORMATION

NIMH does not have a formal dissemination strategy or a method to meaningfully evaluate its dissemination efforts. Although one division has been given primary responsibility for planning and directing dissemination activities, that division has not developed a plan to do so. Other divisions also disseminate information related to research they support without formal coordination with that division. As a result of this fragmented effort, NIMH has no assurance that all

potential users are receiving the research results nor does it know if their current activities are the most effective means of disseminating scientific information.

Dissemination strategy

The Division of Scientific and Public Information has primary responsibility for planning and directing the acquisition and dissemination of scientific and technical information related to mental health. At the time of our survey, however, the division had no written dissemination plan. Other divisions also disseminate information related to the research they support without formal coordination with the Division of Scientific and Public Information. One division is now compiling its own formal dissemination plan by asking the staff to identify clusters of projects which could be disseminated through grants or contracts, and to specify both the audience to be addressed and the form the dissemination should take, i.e., conferences, workshops, pamphlets, or monographs.

In the past, the Secretary of HEW required formal Institute-wide and division planning for dissemination. This was known as a communications plan. In recent years, however, this requirement has been dropped due, in part, to a change in departmental priorities. We believe, that a return to formal dissemination planning would be beneficial. A flexible plan would set Institute and division goals, allow divisions to coordinate their dissemination efforts, and provide a base against which evaluations could be made.

NIMH officials told us that various obstacles exist which make formal dissemination planning difficult. One is the cost that would be involved. Another is the possibility that NIMH divisions would need planning help from the already taxed resources of the Division of Scientific and Public Information. Another possible obstacle is the lack of authority within NIMH, below the office of the director, to make overall dissemination policy. The director of the Division of Scientific and Public Information is on a level with other division directors and cannot veto their plans. We do not believe any of these obstacles are insurmountable.

Evaluation of dissemination efforts

Despite 22 recommendations made by the NIMH Research Task Force in November 1974 to improve the dissemination and use

of information, we found that many of the cited weaknesses still exist. For instance, some grant files are still incomplete. Final reports and journal articles are often missing. Consequently, attempts to use the files as a dissemination resource are difficult. Also, NIMH mailing lists still contain duplicate names, although efforts are now being initiated to purge the duplicates. One NIMH official felt that dissemination decisions are generally not based on needs, and materials are not always getting to the proper destinations. In addition, the Task Force report contained a recommendation--that the NIMH Director issue an explicit mandate that dissemination be an integral part of NIMH's research effort. We were told that no such mandate is forthcoming.

We were given several reasons why the Task Force report's recommendations were not being followed up. NIMH disagreed with some of the recommendations and felt others were too general, would be too costly, or were already being implemented.

We also found that no status report on the dissemination weaknesses and recommendations has been issued by NIMH. Because some of the dissemination problems cited in the report still exist we believe NIMH should issue a status report on the weaknesses the Task Force noted, including areas of disagreement, proposed alternatives, and the feasibility of implementing the remaining recommendations.

The Task Force also reported that feedback from dissemination and utilization activities was very sparse, preventing evaluation of their effectiveness and discouraging any plans for improvement. The Division of Scientific and Public Information now has one branch which is to plan, conduct, and support continuing appraisal of the use and impact of NIMH's scientific information products and communication activities. To date, the branch has not been able to do any evaluations because of staffing limitations.

In September 1977, NIMH issued a contract to develop a plan for evaluating the activities of the Division of Scientific and Public Information. An evaluation of the division should help identify ineffective efforts, demonstrate instances of useful products, provide a sound basis for rational and creative improvements in the information programs, and analyze program costs versus benefits. Although the study is aimed at only one division, an NIMH official said any recommendations

would probably indirectly influence other divisions. In general, according to an NIMH official, feedback on dissemination activities is very important but is also costly and time consuming.

We believe NIMH should explore other ways of effectively getting feedback on its overall dissemination efforts. One possibility might be attaching a standard questionnaire, usable by different audiences, to the products it sends out. NIMH officials said such an idea might have some merit, although it would have to be carefully thought out to avoid over-simplification or counter-productivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the management of NIMH's research programs, we recommend that you require the Director of NIMH to

- annually prepare a research report showing overall NIMH research priorities and assessing research accomplishments and needs;
- develop and implement formal procedures for grant monitoring and final reporting;
- complete and take action on the ongoing analysis of grant deficiencies;
- develop a formal research dissemination plan for NIMH; and
- prepare a status report on the dissemination weaknesses noted by NIMH's Research Task Force, including actions taken, areas of disagreement, proposed alternatives, and the feasibility of implementing the remaining recommendations.

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We are also providing copies of this report to the Assistant Inspector General for auditing. We would appreciate your comments on any actions taken related to this report.

Sincerely yours,

Stephen J. Varholy
Associate Director