

## **New approaches shape latest council meeting**

*By Ernie Hood*

The National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council held its 141st [meeting](#) Feb. 19-20, highlighting new agenda elements added in response to the council's September 2013 meeting. That gathering included a mini-retreat, during which council members and NIEHS leaders assessed their mutual needs.

Accordingly, this meeting included just one scientific lecture (see [related article](#)), fewer formal presentations, more council discussion time, and efforts to elicit council's consultation and advice earlier in the process of formulating new programs.

### **Council input sought in grant selection criteria**

As part of her usual report to the council, Gwen Collman, Ph.D., director of the NIEHS Division of Extramural Research and Training (DERT), included time for council discussion and advice on a proposed new approach to selecting grants that are past the so-called pay line, a percentile-based cutoff point for funding grant awards.

The panel engaged in a robust discussion of the many issues involved. Council member Norbert Kaminski, Ph.D., of Michigan State University, was concerned about setting a conservative pay line. "I could see the pay line continuing to drift downward as money becomes more and more scarce," he said.

Several panelists expressed a desire to see grant applications themselves rather than just the summary statements prepared by staffers. "Can we see something that speaks from the heart of the investigator, so that we're not looking through the glass darkly all the time?" asked Kim Boekelheide, M.D., Ph.D., from Brown University.



*Collman welcomed a new DERT program administrator to the division. Neuroscientist Jon Hollander, PhD, a former staff scientist at the Scripps Research Institute in Jupiter, Fla., joined the Genes, Environment, and Health Branch, assuming responsibilities with the Parkinson's disease and neurodevelopment portfolios. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)*

Collman noted that perhaps a balance could be struck so that council members can see certain parts of grant applications, but not entire applications, which could give the appearance of circumventing the peer review process.

### **"We have a budget!"**

So NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., happily reported to the council, and for the first time in many council meetings over the last few years, thorny budget issues did not dominate. Certainty and stability are welcome trends, but Birnbaum provided an important reminder. "What we have gotten at NIH is about two-thirds restoration of the cuts we had seen due to across-the-board rescission [contract changes] and sequestration reduction," she said.

"The really good news is that we actually have an appropriation," said NIH Principal Deputy Director Lawrence Tabak, D.D.S., Ph.D., who updated the council on current NIH initiatives. "But the not-so-good news is that if you look at our appropriation indexed to 1998 dollars, effectively NIH has become un-doubled in terms of our buying power," he added.

Tabak also updated the council on NIH activities including big data programs, biomedical workforce and diversity initiatives, and challenges in supporting the best science, for example in peer review.

### **Training discussion**

In the spirit of involving the council earlier in the decision-making process, DERT staffers Michael Humble, Ph.D., Carol Shreffler, Ph.D., and Christie Drew, Ph.D., presented the board with both an update on the DERT training program and an opportunity for substantial discussion of current issues and potential directions.

Among several discussion topics, the council focused mainly on determining a healthy balance between institutional [T32 training programs](#) and individual fellowships. In April, NIEHS will begin offering NIH [F31 Individual Predoctoral Fellowships](#) to graduate students. They will be funded from the same pool of resources as T32 programs.

"The fundamental question is, what benefits are there to NIEHS to reaching the goals of the strategic plan by moving money out of the T32s and into F31 programs?" asked David Eaton, Ph.D., of the University of Washington. Humble noted that the change would enhance the flexibility of the training program.

### **Concepts approved**

The council also voted unanimously to approve concepts involving mitochondria, energetics, epigenetics, environment, and DNA damage response (commonly referred to as MEEED), environmental health disparities research, and new training initiatives for the Worker Education and Training Program.

The next council meeting is scheduled for May 13-14.

(Ernie Hood is a contract writer with the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison.)



*Along with her usual discussion of legislative activities, science advances, meetings, events, and NIEHS and NTP awards and recognitions, Birnbaum briefed council members on the NIH Disaster Research Response Initiative (DR2). DR2 is a pilot project being led by NIEHS and supported by the National Library of Medicine, aimed at developing ready-to-go research data collection tools and a network of trained research responders. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)*



*Discussing the proposed environmental health disparities research concept, council member Lisa Conti, D.V.M., of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, noted the importance of partnering with state agencies that are anxious to share their considerable databases with researchers. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)*



Council member Elizabeth Yeampierre, J.D., executive director of UPROSE, Brooklyn, N.Y., said she was excited about the Disaster Research Response initiative, citing the difficulty presented by a lack of baseline data in the wake of disasters such as Hurricane Sandy. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Council member Mary Lee, M.D., of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, right, asked Tabak about the lack of a gold standard in NIH funding deliberations. He replied that despite myriad analytic efforts, "The gold standard remains expert opinion." (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Tabak described an ongoing series of NIH activities designed to enhance scientific reproducibility and replication. "We need everybody to join together to help overcome what has become an increasingly troublesome set of issues," he said. "But what NIH does alone isn't going to be sufficient, and that's why I used this opportunity to address your council," he added, citing the fact that all council members were likely editors or on the editorial boards of scientific journals and in a position to influence reproducibility criteria. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



From left to right, council members Linda McCauley, Ph.D., R.N., of Emory University, Randall Kramer, Ph.D., of Duke University, and Kaminski paid close attention to the meeting's proceedings. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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