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Letter to the Editor
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Scientists Who Serve

The Oct. 30 news story "NIH's New Ethics Rules Lead Some to Ponder Jumping Ship" sounded the alarm that restrictions on outside income may cause the best and the brightest of the National Institutes of Health's researchers to retire or leave for academia, which has more lenient rules on moonlighting.

But NIH Director Elias A. Zerhouni cast doubt on this conclusion in a recent memorandum he sent to NIH staff members. He told the NIH employees that data last year indicate there has "not been a

change in the rate of resignations or retirements among NIH scientists over the past several years."

Clearly some researchers at NIH want the extra pay of private consulting on top of a full-time NIH salary, which for some exceeds \$150,000. If they leave, they could be replaced by scientists more dedicated to public service.

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UPDATE

NIH's New Ethics Rules Lead Some to Ponder Jumping Ship

By Rita Beamish
Associated Press
Monday, October 30, 2006; Page A15

Nearly 40 percent of the scientists conducting hands-on research at the National Institutes of Health say they are looking for other jobs or are considering doing so to escape new ethics rules that have curtailed their opportunity to earn outside income.

Most scientists say the ethics crackdown is too severe, and nearly three-quarters of them think it will hinder the government's ability to attract and keep medical researchers, according to a survey commissioned by the government's premier medical research agency.

The tightened rules were established last year after NIH found that dozens of scientists had run afoul of existing restrictions with private consulting deals that had enriched them with money from drug and biotechnology companies.

Outside income from such companies is now banned. NIH also is placing greater restrictions and disclosure requirements on employees' financial holdings.

"Of course we are concerned when any employees are saying they might consider leaving as a result of a change of policy," said Raynard S. Kington, the agency's principal deputy director. But he said in a



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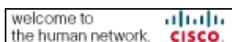
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telephone interview Friday that the survey results are muddy because they combine those actively seeking to leave and those thinking about it.

NIH Director Elias A. Zerhouni, in a letter Thursday to the staff, said the survey "does suggest concerns about the impact of the regulations on recruitment and retention." But he added: "At this time we do not anticipate revisions in the regulations."

About 8,000 NIH employees, or about half the workforce, responded to the Internet-based survey. Employee job satisfaction was generally high, the survey found. But 39 percent of the scientists researching disease and cures -- known as tenure and tenure-track scientists -- said they were actively seeking new work or considering leaving NIH because of the rules.

Overall, 3,336 NIH scientists responded to the survey, including 512 tenure and tenure-track researchers.

Among all NIH scientists, 18 percent said they were trying to leave or considering it. Those not in the tenure group typically do not conduct research and instead manage outside research performed with NIH money by universities and other nonfederal entities. They are less likely to have private consulting opportunities.

One-third of all NIH scientists said they thought the new rules would hurt NIH's ability to fulfill its mission, and most said the old rules could have been enforced better rather than tightened.

Kington highlighted a finding that nearly nine in 10 scientists reported they intend to work at NIH a year from now. Despite rumblings of low morale, he said the scientists' job satisfaction rate of 81 percent reflects one of the government's most positive workforces.

Officials also emphasized employees' opinion that the new rules will boost the agency's credibility with the public; 73 percent of the employees who responded agreed with that, the survey found.

Arthur Caplan, medical ethics chairman at the University of Pennsylvania, said tighter rules are needed but "we still haven't figured out exactly how to manage conflict of interest."

"The leaders of the NIH and in Congress have to think a bit harder about giving a tiny bit of breathing room so that NIH scientists are not sent into a monastery from which they can't ever come out in the name of scientific integrity," he said.

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