

Council has a busy two days

By Ernie Hood

With almost all council members and *ex officio* members in attendance, NIEHS held its 140th meeting of the National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council Sept. 10-11. The council had a full agenda and got right to work.

NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., and Division of Extramural Research and Training (DERT) Director Gwen Collman, Ph.D., provided detailed accounts of Institute developments and accomplishments since the May council meeting. Council members also heard presentations on several topics, from a scientific talk on house dust and asthma (see [related article](#)) to progress reports on several important NIEHS initiatives.

Budget outlook remains cloudy

Birnbaum said budget uncertainty continues to be a major issue, but predicted that the government would continue to operate under a series of continuing resolutions (CRs) beyond the end of the current fiscal year on Sept. 31.

"We are hopeful that they will not be one- or two-day or one-week CRs, but that we will end up with at least a one-month if not a two-month CR, while Congress tries to figure out how to deal with the budget," Birnbaum said.

She noted that sequestration could continue or even expand in fiscal year 2014, which would bring challenges in fulfilling the Institute's mission. Despite the prospect of dwindling resources, Birnbaum stressed that NIH will maintain its footing as the country's leading medical research agency (see [text box](#)).

Confirmation of DERT reorganization

DERT, which manages grant applications and awards for NIEHS, will be reorganized, according to Collman. Beginning Oct. 6, DERT will have a total of eight branches - four newly organized branches, appearing first in the list below, and four existing branches:

- Genes, Environment, and Health Branch - Branch Chief Cindy Lawler, Ph.D.
- Population Health Branch - Branch Chief Claudia Thompson, Ph.D.
- Exposure, Response, and Technology Branch - Acting Branch Chief David Balshaw, Ph.D.
- Hazardous Substances Research Branch - Branch Chief William Suk, Ph.D.
- Program Analysis Branch - Branch Chief, Christina Drew Ph.D.
- Grants Management Branch - Branch Chief Dorothy Duke
- Scientific Review Branch - Acting Branch Chief Patrick Mastin, Ph.D.
- Worker Education and Training Branch - Branch Chief Joseph (Chip) Hughes



Among the many scientific advances Birnbaum shared with council, was a recent [publication](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23747832) (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23747832>) on the *Consortium Linking Academic and Regulatory Insights on BPA Toxicity program*, which represents a new approach to synergizing academic and guideline-compliant research. The initiative involves several DERT and NTP scientists collaborating with colleagues at the FDA. "We are very optimistic that this is a new paradigm for how certain kinds of research questions can be addressed," said Birnbaum. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



During her DERT Director's Report, Collman welcomed Alfonso Latoni, Ph.D., the soon-to-be new chief of the DERT Scientific Review Branch (SRB), who will join NIEHS in November, after serving five years as deputy SRB chief at the National Institute on Aging. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Collman also described Phase II of the DERT initiative to categorize the research grants portfolio according to how they align with the NIEHS strategic plan. The multi-project and training grants have already been completed, comprising more than 1,800 grants.

"Looking today at our portfolio helps us, in DERT, look for areas of heavy investment versus areas where perhaps there's lighter investment, looking for gaps," Collman said. "Using this kind of data when we're doing program development, will help us look at initiatives in the future and how they line up with the strategic plan opportunities."

A plethora of updates

Former council member Grace LeMasters, Ph.D., from the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, reported, by phone, on her participation in the [NIH Council of Councils](http://dpcpsi.nih.gov/council/index.aspx), (<http://dpcpsi.nih.gov/council/index.aspx>) representing NIEHS. The Council of Councils advises the NIH director on matters related to policies and activities of the [Division of Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives](http://dpcpsi.nih.gov/index.aspx), (<http://dpcpsi.nih.gov/index.aspx>) which plans and implements trans-NIH initiatives supported by the [Common Fund](http://commonfund.nih.gov/index.aspx), (<http://commonfund.nih.gov/index.aspx>) and coordinates research related to AIDS, behavioral and social sciences, women's health, disease prevention, and research infrastructure.

The council was also updated on issues related to research reproducibility, by NTP Associate Director John Bucher, Ph.D., and Environmental Health Perspectives (EHP) Editor-in-Chief Hugh Tilson, Ph.D.; the [Common Fund](http://commonfund.nih.gov/index.aspx) (<http://commonfund.nih.gov/index.aspx>) program, by Health Scientist Administrator Kimberly Gray, Ph.D.; and the Toxicant Exposures and Responses by Genomic and Epigenomic Regulators of Transcription (TaRGET) Program, by Program Administrator Frederick Tyson, Ph.D.

On the meeting's second day, council and NIEHS leadership conducted a mini-retreat. The discussion included whether NIEHS is getting what it needs from council, how council can engage in the implementation of the strategic plan, and council's strategy ideas for funding the best quality science in the current fiscal reality.

The next council meeting is scheduled for Feb. 19-20, 2014.

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



Tilson contributed his ideas to the discussion on scientific data reproducibility, from the perspective of a journal editor. He has been at the helm of EHP for the past six years. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Long-time council member Edward Postlethwait, Ph.D., from the University of Alabama School of Public Health, emphasized a point during council discussion. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Council members, from left, Linda McCauley, Ph.D., R.N., of Emory University; Norbert Kaminski, Ph.D., of Michigan State University; and David Eaton, Ph.D., of the University of Washington, paid close attention to the council proceedings. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Ex officio council member Yvonne Maddox, Ph.D., shared the perspective of a sister institute during council proceedings. She is deputy director of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Council member Howard Hu, M.D., Sc.D., of the University of Toronto, made several convincing comments during the council meeting. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Impact of NIH on the nation's health and economy

During her remarks, Birnbaum mentioned a few examples of how NIH improves lives and helps drive the economy.

- Impact of medical research on Americans' health
 - Life expectancy gains worth approximately \$3.2 trillion annually.
 - Cardiovascular disease rates have fallen more than 60 percent in the past 50 years.
 - Cancer rates are falling about 1 percent per year. Each 1 percent drop saves almost \$5 billion.
 - HIV therapies enable people in their 20s with the infection to live to 70 years old and beyond.
- Impact of NIH-supported research on U.S. economy
 - In 2012, NIH funding:
 - Supported more than 402,000 jobs at 2,500 institutions and small businesses nationwide.
 - Generated more than \$7.8 billion in new economic activity - nearly twice U.S. taxpayers' investment.
 - NIH as a foundation for the entire U.S. medical innovation sector:
 - Total employment impact of 7 million jobs
 - Exports equal \$90 billion in goods and services

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(bruskec@niehs.nih.gov)

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