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A 'troubled organization'

A Times Editorial
Published July 26, 2005

Dr. Jonathan Fishbein was hired at the National Institutes of Health's AIDS research agency in 2003 with implicit directions to improve safety standards. During his tenure as chief of human research protection, he became an outspoken whistle-blower, exposing corruption and demanding accountability. For his trouble, Fishbein was fired this month just as his claims were substantiated in an internal review that calls the AIDS agency a "troubled organization." This is no way to run a publicly funded operation whose effectiveness depends as much on its credibility as its science.

The review, reported by the Associated Press, sheds light on the problems at National Institutes of Health's AIDS agency. It cites frequent feuding among managers, sexual harassment and other instances of misconduct. Recent incidents of indefensibly flawed research include an NIH AIDS study in Africa that violated federal safety regulations in using foster children to test AIDS drugs in NIH-funded research. Such unacceptable practices within the division taints its research and impedes the global fight against the AIDS epidemic.

Fishbein appears to have been fired for his candor. The internal review finds that Fishbein didn't receive any warnings of poor performance until after he raised concerns about a sensitive AIDS study, according to the Associated Press. Fishbein then was forced to report to a deputy director whom he had previously criticized. The new boss, who was cited in the review for using "sexually explicit and colorful language," instigated efforts to fire Fishbein. Dismissing the agency's whistle-blower leaves an even larger cloud over the agency's already waning credibility.

Fishbein's firing "is clearly a sketch of a deeper issue," the internal report concludes. Several members of Congress already have objected to Fishbein's firing, calling it an example of punishing a whistle-blower for delivering unpleasant news.

With the integrity of the AIDS agency in jeopardy, Congress should conduct a thorough investigation aimed at cleaning up the mess and restoring the agency's reputation as a leader in essential research.

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