

## A Chill in the Air

*The ANA fights to preserve the integrity of scientific research.*

One fall morning in 2003, Ruth Malone, PhD, RN, was reading the newspaper when she spotted a story about a hit list targeting some 150 university researchers whose federally supported studies were deemed offensive by certain members of Congress and a Washington, DC-based, ultra-conservative group called the Traditional Values Coalition (TVC).

The story was of particular interest to Malone because some of her research at the University of California, San Francisco, was federally funded. Malone's interest soon turned into shock when she saw her own name.

"It never occurred to me that I'd be targeted by a group like TVC," says Malone, an ANA-California member and expert on tobacco-related issues. "It's one thing for [special interest] groups and lawmakers to have particular beliefs, but to so blatantly interfere with science is very concerning."

Malone often studies vulnerable or marginalized populations and relies on federal funds to support larger-scale research activities. The study that put her on the list was a project, supported by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), exploring the tobacco industry's targeting of gays, who have been shown to have high rates of smoking. (The TVC opposes government funding of projects that explore certain topics, such as sexuality, HIV-AIDS, and birth control other than abstinence.)

The ANA, the American Academy of Nursing (AAN), the

Union of Concerned Scientists, and a host of other groups are fighting to stop the politicization of science.

### WHAT THEY ARE FIGHTING FOR—AND AGAINST

Over the past four years, many in the scientific community say there's been an unprecedented attempt to interfere with two vital components of the research process: peer review and funding. Simply put, the peer-review process involves a close examination by a panel of unbiased scientific experts to determine whether a research topic is worthy of study and, ultimately, grant funding. The NIH's review process is particularly rigorous and is respected worldwide.

"When researchers submit a grant proposal, they must provide detailed information, from why something needs to be studied to how they are going to go about studying the issue," says Laurie Badzek, JD, RN, LLM, director of the ANA's Center for Ethics and Human Rights. "It then goes before a body of their peers, who are capable of reviewing the grant proposal and who understand the science, the process, and the content."

Although the hit list has not yet resulted in the rescinding of government funding, it's become emblematic of the growing political pressure on scientific research. The following is what some researchers and Congressman Henry Waxman (D-CA) say is a multi-pronged approach to curbing scientific freedom:

- Last year, the U.S. House of Representatives barely defeated an amendment introduced by Congressman Pat

Toomey (R-PA) that would have blocked NIH funding for a handful of research projects, focused on sexual behaviors, that he called "ridiculous" in a news release.

- After frequently disagreeing with the Bush administration's positions on the ethics of biomedical research, two highly regarded members of the President's Council on Bioethics were dismissed, according to information on Waxman's Web site. The ranking member of the Committee on Government Reform, Waxman published a report in 2003 that cited political interference in more than 20 scientific areas, including health care and the environment.
- The Union of Concerned Scientists contends that the administration has placed unqualified people or those with conflicts of interest on scientific advisory committees, eliminated existing advisory committees, and censored or suppressed reports by government scientists.

### TAKING ACTION

Nearly 630 nurse leaders participating in the ANA's House of Delegates meeting in June approved a resolution supporting RNs and others in the scientific community in their quest to improve the lives of patient populations—regardless of the patients' risk-taking behaviors, sexual orientation, disease, or illness.

The measure, in part, calls for the ANA to oppose "any political or ideological interference" in the peer-review

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process—no matter which party is in the White House. Delegates also asked that the ANA oppose any attempts “to rescind or block funding for health-related research on philosophical or political considerations or other nonscientific grounds.”

“We’ve made great advances in science and medicine based on the peer-review process in this country,” says Alaska Nurses Association member Pat Senner, MS, RN, ANP, who spoke in support of the resolution. “I find it extremely distressing that a political or religious group would consider letting potentially millions of individuals suffer illness or injury because they refuse to conform to that group’s ‘ideal’ pattern of behavior.”

Senner, who runs a clinic for homeless teenagers, has seen how political philosophies can interfere with the development of health care policy in her state. She is calling on nurses and others concerned about science in the United States to fight back.

“It’s important that nurses continue to provide health care to all individuals and that health care be research-based,” Senner says. “We don’t want to pretend that certain segments of the population are invisible or don’t count.”

Linda Bearinger, PhD, RN, FAAN, director of the Center for Adolescent Nursing at the University of Minnesota, made the hit list for a study that examined factors that influenced young people to use protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and pregnancy.

Bearinger discovered that her work, along with that of several other university colleagues, was targeted after an NIH staffer asked her to review a “reworded” version of the abstract that accompanied her original research proposal. She was told that the NIH would use

this abstract to “justify to Congress” the funding of her study. The timing was particularly odd because she had already completed the four-year study when the list came out. Furthermore, she was using an existing database involving young people who already were sexually active.

“To think that after our research project passed muster with all levels of peer review at the National Institutes of Health, we’d have to do more to justify it—especially after it was funded—was shocking to me,” says Bearinger, a Minnesota Nurses Association member. She says she also was warned that researchers needed to be careful about the words they used in future titles and abstracts of their NIH proposals because certain words might raise red flags.

After strategizing with colleagues in and out of nursing, Bearinger helped frame resolutions opposing political interference for several organizations.

“I felt very vulnerable,” she says. “Right now I am working under three federal grants with several other proposals under review, so my colleagues and I began to worry that our names alone would raise a red flag—threatening our funding and the ability to move forward with the science we conduct.”

“We know it’s absolutely critical to do research on what keeps young people healthy, and this is clearly a case of ideology trumping science.”

One group Bearinger enlisted in her quest was the AAN, an ANA affiliate. (After issuing a “Resolution on Inappropriate Constraints on Research” in November 2003, the AAN asked the ANA to take action.)

AAN president Joan Shaver, PhD, RN, FAAN, says academy fellows are very concerned about

this new attack against certain research topics because it goes against the work and fundamental beliefs of nurse scientists.

“If we can’t have the freedom we need to investigate society’s needs, we can’t find solutions,” says Shaver, an Illinois Nurses Association member.

Shaver says that there were researchers at her university who were targeted for their studies of lesbians’ health, STDs, and the prevention of HIV–AIDS.

### **THE WORK GOES ON?**

At least 36 scientific organizations have issued statements defending the peer-reviewed and funded NIH research that’s being scrutinized on ideological grounds, as well as on the need to keep an eye out for more attempts to quash scientific discovery.

The ANA’s nurse leaders believe that nurse researchers are at particular risk if ideological beliefs determine what gets studied, because RNs tend to examine topics related to reproduction, human sexuality, risk-taking behaviors, psychosocial issues, and vulnerable populations.

Furthermore, many nurse researchers rely on government grants because they can fund larger-scale studies that can have a greater impact on the practice of health care and people’s lives, Badzek says.

She and other RNs worry whether the current efforts targeting certain research will have a “chilling effect” on nurse researchers.

“But if you anticipate more such threats, would you continue to risk your academic career?” Malone asks. “It’s frightening—both to researchers and for the effect it could have on the public’s trust in the integrity of the NIH review process.” ▼