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OIG Outlines Multiple Probes Into NIH, PIs Who May Have Failed to Disclose All Support

By Theresa Defino

The HHS Office of Inspector General (OIG) is investigating allegations that a dozen principal investigators (PIs) with NIH awards “failed to disclose foreign affiliations on their grant applications,” IG Daniel Levinson revealed in a recent letter to Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, chair of the Senate Finance Committee. But Levinson also made clear that PIs aren’t his only target.

OIG also is looking into NIH’s operations, with a number of audits and reviews already underway or recently released, Levinson told Grassley. These include “evaluations to assess NIH’s vetting and oversight of its peer reviewers, including its efforts to prevent or detect inappropriate sharing of information by peer reviewers.” OIG is also probing “how NIH monitors the financial conflicts of interest (including foreign financial interests) reported by grantee institutions,” among other inquiries.

The correspondence between Grassley and Levinson illustrates the high level of ongoing concerns about foreign influences in U.S. research, which have intensified since last summer when NIH Director Francis Collins first testified about the topic before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee. Grassley wrote to Levinson after receiving responses to questions he posed to Collins (“Grassley: NIH Response on Foreign Influences ‘Leaves Many Questions Unanswered,’” *RRC E-Alert*, Jan. 17, 2019).

The 12 PIs are double the number Collins said at the time that NIH itself was investigating “based on suspicions that researchers with federal grants failed to disclose significant financial contributions from foreign governments” (“NIH Warns Institutions to be Vigilant Against Threats to U.S. Research From ‘Foreign Entities,’” *RRC* 15, no. 9).

Late last year, a high-ranking NIH committee submitted a series of recommendations both the agency and institutions should take to safeguard their research (“NIH Embraces Efforts to Thwart Foreign Entities, Recommends Similar Strategies for Universities,” *RRC* 16, no. 1).

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