

RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

News and Analysis for Colleges, Universities and Teaching Hospitals

Long Vacancy at the Helm of ORI Prompts Concerns; Director to Be Named 'Soon?'

The Office of Research Integrity, charged with safeguarding research against scientific misconduct and investigating cases of falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism among those receiving billions in research funds from the Department of Health and Human Services, has not had a director since 2009, following the retirement of longtime head Chris Pascal.

Pascal officially retired Sept. 12, 2009, but he was actually on leave beginning in March of that year. The vacancy is being criticized as sending troubling signals to the scientific community, at an especially sensitive time. Members of the press and Congress, especially Sen. Charles Grassley, have had a laser-like focus on federal agencies and whether they are doing enough to assure that science is free of outside influences and conducted with integrity.

In response to questions from *RRC*, a spokeswoman for HHS, of which ORI is part, issued a short statement saying "a search is underway to name a new director soon" but would not explain what "soon" meant.

She also would not respond to specific questions about the steps in the process for hiring Pascal's replacement, so it is unclear whether a formal job opening has yet been announced. The appointment does not require Senate confirmation. The ORI director reports to the HHS assistant secretary for health, in the Office of Public Health and Science (OPHS).

Until recently, it would not have even been clear that Pascal had, in fact, left ORI; approximately 10 days ago, an OPHS webpage still listed Pascal as the director. After *RRC* brought the error to HHS's attention, the website was updated to list Donald Wright as acting director.

Wright's HHS bio, however, lists him as the assistant secretary for healthcare quality; it does not mention ORI.

The entirety of HHS's response on the issue consisted of the sentence about an appointment coming soon, and a description of the duties of the ORI director, as follows:

"The director of ORI provides executive leadership, guidance and oversight to research integrity functions

of the Public Health Service. The director provides leadership and advocacy for the establishment of strong integrity programs in government and the private sector to improve detection of and prevent research misconduct and to promote research integrity. Moreover, the director provides oversight and monitors the development of policies and procedures for preventing, detecting, reporting and handling instances of alleged or suspected misconduct in science. The director also oversees the operational activities and procedures of ORI."

Vacancy Decried as 'Inexcusable'

Art Caplan, director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania, called it "inexcusable that there is still no permanent director."

"This sends the wrong message at a time when concerns over research integrity are paramount in the minds of funders, researchers, and subjects," Caplan told *RRC*. "Having this position vacant suggests that integrity in research is not a top priority at the federal level when it absolutely must be."

Jim Wells, formerly a consultant to ORI and currently the director of research policy for the University of Wisconsin-Madison, also expressed his dismay at the length of the vacancy.

"It is regrettable that HHS has been so slow to find a new director for ORI," he told *RRC*. "HHS's failure to find a new director for ORI gives the appearance of a lack of priority for research integrity. ORI is an agency with an important mission to oversee the integrity of federally funded research, and it deserves to have its leadership positions filled in a timely fashion."

Pascal left ORI in good stead, especially with the research compliance community, Wells said.

"Chris Pascal was a capable leader of ORI from 1996–2009, having joined ORI in 1992 at a time when its reputation was at a low point," Wells said. "As a director, he oversaw implementation of the Ryan Commission [on Integrity and Misconduct in Research] recommendations and initiated important new programs

in responsible conduct of research education and research on research integrity.”

Wells also said he personally “had the pleasure to work with Chris and others at ORI helping to estimate the prevalence of research misconduct.”

Current Staff Praised

Mark Frankel, director of the Scientific Freedom, Responsibility and Law Program at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said he believed the delay was not unusual for this White House, but still, he had expected a replacement would have been named already.

“Frankly, this is true throughout the Obama administration,” Frankel said. “So many vacancies, many of them in the science and technology area, have gone vacant or only recently been filled. So I don’t view this as an aberration. That being said, however, I would have hoped that a new director would be in place by now.”

Frankel also praised the staff for doing a good job.

“Fortunately, the functioning of ORI has proceeded quite well despite not having a director, in large part because of the two division directors,” he said, referring to

John Dahlberg, who runs the investigative division, and John Galland, who oversees the education division.

Dahlberg joined ORI in 1992, Galland in May 2009.

“They are first-rate professionals, well-respected for both their ideas and their running of their divisions,” Frankel said.

Yet, HHS needs to be cognizant of how the vacancy looks, Frankel said. “[T]he symbolism of not having a full-time director is something that should be considered. Based on the conversations that I have had recently with the current acting director, I believe that he is well aware of this and eager to fill the slot,” he said.

ORI’s director and staff also play an important role on the international stage, as the global scientific misconduct community increasingly looks to the United States for leadership, direction, and assistance. ORI staff and consultants, for example, were deeply involved in the pioneering World Conference on Research Integrity, held in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2007. ORI representatives also helped plan and spoke at the second annual conference last month in Singapore.

Link: <http://ori.dhhs.gov>. ✧

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