

DOE'S PLAN FOR A-BOMB STUDIES INCITES ANGER IN JAPAN

ON THE EVE OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has angered researchers who are tracking the lingering health effects on the bombs' survivors. The Department announced in January that it would remove the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) as the administrator of funds for the research project, which has been ongoing since 1947. Japanese and American researchers at the Radiation Effects Research Foundation (RERF) in Japan, where the study is being conducted, are concerned that removing NAS from the grant will jeopardize the autonomy of the foundation, introduce a potential bias into the research and put a further squeeze on its budget.

Since the 1950s, results of the RERF study of 100,000 atomic bomb survivors have been widely used for setting international standards for safe doses of radiation in nuclear medicine and the nuclear power industry. Nuclear physicians indirectly use the findings when computing dosimetries. The study continues to evaluate the risk of cancer, heart disease and birth defects from radiation exposure; researchers are just now beginning to measure the incidence of adult-onset cancers among middle-aged survivors who were children, infants or fetuses at the time of the bombings. "The information that we gather over the next few years will have a tremendous importance, which makes us that much more nervous about the DOE's plans," said Dale Preston, PhD, chief of the department of statistics at RERF.

The DOE says its decision to transfer the management of RERF from the NAS to a university was to encourage radiation research in U.S. universities as a whole. Columbia University is the front-runner for the job, but the Department has sent out a request for bids from other contractors and plans to have the new administrator in place by October. The NAS's bylaws forbid it from participating in bidding.

The Impact on Survivors and Staff

The issue at hand is fairly complex with concerns seeming to swirl around perceptions as well as hard-and-fast changes. Since the RERF and its predecessor, the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, were founded, the NAS has been managing the funds, hiring American researchers and overseeing the study on behalf of the American government. The study's

Japanese researchers and participants developed a trust and respect for the NAS, which they view as a prestigious private foundation—not an arm of the American government who had bombed them. Many feel that the NAS provided a crucial buffer between RERF and the government. Both American and Japanese scientists at RERF are now concerned that replacing NAS with a DOE-appointed university will cause the study to lose its neutrality and give survivors the perception that the U.S. government is using them as Guinea pigs.

"The Department of Energy, which was involved in the development of atomic bombs, may directly interfere in our studies," said Akio Awa, PhD, the associate chief of research at RERF, at a January press conference. "If this should occur, it would gravely interfere with our research program by inviting doubts of the people outside concerning the reliability of RERF's study results and offending the A-bomb survivors who are cooperating in our studies." He and other researchers fear that many participants, who have a deep respect for NAS, will now drop out of the study. Case in point: On the day after NAS announced it was being replaced, one survivor canceled his scheduled medical exam in protest.

Although DOE officials have given assurances that the new administrator's relationship with RERF will be unchanged, officials at the foundation predict several dramatic changes that could greatly influence the direction of the study. Under a proposal already submitted to the DOE by Columbia University, the university would not only manage the foundation and recruit staff but would supervise the scientific content of the program. It would also carry out assessments for DOE on the cost effectiveness of continued follow-up of atomic bomb survivors. "Unlike NAS which doesn't have an agenda, a university may decide to shift the direction of RERF research based upon the interests of the DOE or its own professors," said A. Bertrand Brill, MD, PhD, professor of nuclear medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester who has been active in RERF research.

Along with concerns about the future of the study, the 11 American staff members and directors at RERF are also worried about practical matters, namely job security. They are currently employed by NAS, but under the new management they will neither be NAS employees nor university employees. Thus, they will be dependent on RERF to absorb

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their salaries—which may not be feasible from a budgetary standpoint.

DOE's Motivation for Change

At a news conference held at RERF on January 30, Harry Pettengill, PhD, director of the Office of International Health Studies at the DOE, specified “difficult financial conditions” as the primary reason for considering the replacement of NAS with a university. The NAS deducts about 3 percent of the funds ear-marked for RERF for overhead expenses, which Pettengill claimed could be saved by installing a university as manager and having DOE pay RERF directly. However, the bulk of these expenses goes towards paying salaries and cost-of-living adjustments for American staff at RERF—costs that a university would incur as well.

The DOE changed its tune in March stating “training of radiation safety scientists” as the main purpose for initiating the change. But the announcement fueled more rumors when the DOE's in-house weekly newsletter, *Inside Energy*, reported that the purpose was to train young researchers to engage in decontamination work at nuclear weapons plants. This touched off a nerve in the Japanese scientists and study participants who want no part in aiding American weapons plants which were responsible for killing thousands of their population.

“We have clearly not handled communication on this issue as adeptly and skillfully as possible,” said Steven Galson, MD, the chief medical officer in the Office of Environment, Safety & Health at the DOE who has replaced Pettengill as the DOE spokesperson for RERF. He emphasizes the DOE has no plans to use RERF training for the purpose of nuclear plants cleanup and that budgetary concerns are a secondary issue. “Our primary reason for the management change is to foster the training of doctoral students in the field of radiation health effects research which is lacking young researchers.”

Galson and others at the Department feel that a university or consortium of universities would be the ideal manager of the grant for several reasons. A university can easily draw its own PhD candidates to RERF. Its academicians can install a peer review process to the research studies, which RERF currently lacks. Most importantly, university professors can bring a fresh outlook to the research agenda and to RERF employees, many of whom have been there for more than two decades. The DOE felt NAS wasn't equipped to expand the scientific capabilities and agenda of RERF.

John Zimbrick, PhD, director of the Board of Radiation Effects Research at NAS who is directly responsible for RERF matters, disagrees with this assess-

ment. “The Academy doesn't have the self-serving interests of a university,” he said. “We could have expanded training by drawing from university students around the country and picking and choosing the best.” Throughout its management, NAS has involved 77 universities, national laboratories and teaching hospitals in RERF. Zimbrick said NAS was also willing to create a system of peer review, which they had outlined in a plan that was to have been presented to the DOE.

The seeming abruptness of the NAS oust leaves the study's administrators with suspicions that the DOE wants to use the chosen university as a front in order to gain a stronger foothold in the research agenda. “That concern is absolutely unwarranted,” said Galson. “We're not trying to push around DOE's weight and have no interest in getting involved in directing the research or setting the agenda at RERF.” But many aren't convinced. “I think the DOE's comments are just talk,” said Zimbrick. “Even if the Department says it doesn't want to get more involved, it is more involved.”

For instance, last month the DOE began to bypass NAS and transfer all funds directly to Japan via the State Department. RERF administrators must now deal directly with the DOE on monetary issues. As is evident in the world of politics, it's often tempting for the one who controls the financial purse strings to exert pressure on the one who depends on the funding.

Not-So-Deep Pockets

The DOE claims money was not the motivating factor driving the management change, but Preston and others at RERF fear that budget trimming is the Department's ultimate goal. In light of the devaluation of the dollar against the yen, the DOE's monetary concerns are understandable. The Japanese Ministry of Health and the DOE each contribute 50% of the funding for RERF. Although the budget for RERF in yen has remained fairly constant for the past ten years, the value of the yen has more than doubled relative to the dollar. Thus, the U.S. contribution in dollar amounts tripled to \$23 million in 1994. This combined with the recent slashing of DOE's budget puts U.S. funding for RERF in a precarious situation.

Under the squeeze of the past few years, RERF has cut its staff from 503 in 1983 to 375, and NAS has cut its American staff from 22 to 11. “I think there will be more cuts in our budget,” said Preston. “But I think the solution lies in DOE renegotiating its commitment with the Japanese given the devaluation of the dollar—not in getting rid of NAS.”

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