Changes to NIH Peer Review: Framework Clear, Details Mostly Uncertain – In early June, the basic framework for the upcoming changes to enhance the NIH peer review process was made public as a press release from Director Zerhouni's office and the slide set from a more detailed presentation by the internal co-Chair of the enhancing peer review working group (National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research Director Lawrence Tabak) to the NIH Director's Advisory Committee. Several important changes can be gleaned from the slide set:

- The new R01 page limit will be 12 pages, with the limits for other mechanisms scaled accordingly
- Applications will be scored 1-7, with no intermediate gradations
- Assigned reviewers will provide individual scores for each of five review criteria, and a preliminary global score used for streamlining decision (averages will be provided to applicants whose grants are streamlined)
  - Broad criteria: impact, investigator(s), innovation/originality, project plan/feasibility, and environment
  - For non-streamlined proposals, all study section members will provide a global score after discussion
- After this initial scoring, all proposals within relevant categories (e.g. new or clinical investigators, or perhaps the number of revisions to the proposal) will be discussed as a group and ranked therein
- For more experienced applicants, a goal is to balance a retrospective analysis of prior accomplishments with a prospective assessment of what is being proposed; the mechanism of doing so is to be developed
- Finally, the results will be reported using a new summary statement template with separate fields and a prescribed amount of space for each criterion; there will be an optional field for reviewers who wish to provide applicants with additional advice about the proposal ("mentoring"), or suggest that it not be resubmitted without fundamental revision into a new application

The precise timing for implementation of the new application format and review procedures is unclear – my guess is the October 2009 cycle, since the press release mentions a 12-18 month implementation period. Of course, my crystal ball is a bit murky in this area, as you'll see if you compare the predictions in my March column with the summary I've just provided. In particular, I predicted a 7-page R01, and eliminating identification of resubmitted applications. Both of those points were clearly favored by the "diagnosis phase" panel; one can only assume that the implementation working group feared that they might violate the first working principle Director Zerhouni mandated for the overall enhancement process – "first, do no harm!"

I must confess that a much higher proportion of the above discussion than usual is presented verbatim, because there is so little information available outside of the two cited documents. By this time there was supposed to have been a transcript of Dr. Tabak's presentation to the Director's Advisory Committee posted, as well as an article in Science by Director Zerhouni, but neither has been forthcoming.

That's it for the summer, though obviously not for the hurricane season, as I'm nervously watching for updates on Gustav even as I write.

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