

CASE STUDY # 8: Extramural Science Administrators Reviewing Manuscripts

Dr. Adams is an SRA in NINDS. His scientific area is visual neuroscience; his present responsibilities are to administer the review of fellowship applications. He receives a request from the editor of The Journal of Neuroscience to review a paper submitted by Dr. Jackson on signal transduction in the retina. He thinks that this activity will enhance his professional standing and his supervisor agrees that he can do this as an "official duty" activity. When he reviews the manuscript, it is clear to him that there are fundamental problems in the experimental design and that the work is not of the quality normally expected for that journal. He writes a very negative review. A couple of months later as he is going through the fellowship applications he is to review, he notices that Dr. Martin's application has a supporting letter from his Ph.D. mentor, Dr. Jackson. He discusses the situation with his supervisor.

Should Dr. Adams have turned down the opportunity to review the manuscript from Dr. Jackson in the first place? Should he recuse himself from administration of the review or can he simply alert the review panel to this potential conflict?

Reviewing scientific manuscripts submitted for publication is an activity that can enhance the professional standing and scientific credibility of NIH scientific staff, which should be allowed when it does not interfere with the employee's NIH duties. However, occasionally, as in this situation, this activity will result in a conflict that must be managed. Since Dr. Adams has reviewed Dr. Jackson's recent manuscript, he should not administer the review of an application submitted by Dr. Jackson or an application in which Dr. Jackson is named. It is not sufficient for Dr. Adams to explain the potential conflict to the review panel. He must alert his supervisor to the conflict/appearance of conflict and recuse himself from administering the review.

If this kind of situation occurs with some frequency, it may affect the supervisor's willingness to approve Dr. Adams' request to perform manuscript reviews. The supervisor needs to balance Dr. Adams' professional development, etc., with his ability to perform his job. In this situation, it may be difficult, but Dr. Adams' supervisor should work with Dr. Adams to monitor his official duty activities and to try to identify potential conflicts as they arise. For example, if Dr. Jackson had submitted an application that normally would go to Dr. Adams for review, Dr. Adams' supervisor should either prevent the assignment of that application to Dr. Adams or, when the conflict is called to his attention, immediately arrange to transfer it to another HSA's portfolio.

Does reviewing a manuscript always put an SRA in conflict; and if so, for how long?

A number of considerations impact the seriousness of the conflict or perceived conflict. Note that, in the situation described, the review of the manuscript occurred recently. Had this review occurred much earlier, there probably would be no need for a recusal. Indeed, Dr. Adams might not even remember that he reviewed the manuscript. In all similar cases, common sense and professional judgment should be brought to bear. However, it is always useful for an employee to discuss a potential concern with the supervisor.

Would the matter be handled differently were Dr. Adams a Program Officer, rather than an SRA?

Similar considerations come into play were Dr. Adams a Program Officer. In fact, since Program Officers are in a position to make a recommendation regarding funding, the potential for an appearance of conflict may even be greater. Finally, there are some extramural scientists who have no responsibilities for specific applications (for example, scientists in policy offices). For these individuals, it may be appropriate for the supervisor to issue a blanket waiver allowing them to review manuscripts without seeking separate approval for each, but this would apply to only a small number of extramural scientists.