



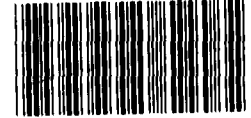
UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

~~2174~~
118305

HUMAN RESOURCES
DIVISION

April 28, 1982

Thomas E. Malone, Ph.D.
Acting Director
National Institutes of Health
Department of Health and Human
Services



118305

Dear Dr. Malone:

Subject: Annual Report Requirement for Detailed
Descriptions of Intramural Research Projects
(HRD-82-75)

As part of our ongoing review of the National Cancer Institute's (NCI's) intramural research program, we examined the requirement for NCI and nine other institutes at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to prepare detailed descriptions of their intramural research projects for their annual reports. Our examination disclosed that preparing these project descriptions is costly and that some of the information they contain is available from other sources. According to some NCI officials, the detailed descriptions serve little purpose. Other NIH institute officials have mixed opinions about them. This report deals with the need for detailed intramural research project descriptions. We plan to issue a separate report on NCI's intramural research program in the near future.

BACKGROUND

Annually, NIH's Deputy Director for Science sends each institute instructions for preparing annual reports which highlight their research operations. The annual report instructions require that, for each project, a PHS Form 6040, "Notice of Intramural Research Project," be prepared which includes basic data about, and a 200-word summary of, the project. In addition, the instructions require preparation of a more detailed project description, which may contain as many as five subsections along with a list of publications resulting from the project. The annual reports are intended for management's use in evaluating program operations and preparing reports to the Department and the Congress. The distribution of these reports is generally limited to the originating institute.

In March 1982, NIH revised its annual report instructions and now only requires the institutes to prepare and submit

0171964

the PHS Form 6040. However, the revised instructions still require the institutes to prepare detailed project descriptions for retention within the originating institute.

Continuing to prepare the PHS Form 6040 appears appropriate because it provides information for an automated information system. ^{1/} This information system is a resource used by researchers both within and outside NIH to learn what research is being done and by whom. According to an NCI official, an average of 1,180 inquiries were made annually for information from the system during fiscal years 1978-81. Also, the system is used to prepare an annual research index which lists intramural research projects and researchers for all of NIH and the National Institute of Mental Health.

However, as discussed below, we question the need to continue the preparation of the detailed project descriptions.

COST AND USE OF NCI
PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Within NCI, three divisions prepare annual reports which contain detailed descriptions for individual intramural research projects. Our analysis of these reports for fiscal year 1980 showed that they contained 647 project descriptions, averaging slightly over 4 pages in length. Based on a random sample of 64 descriptions, we estimated that the salary costs of the principal investigators who prepared the descriptions and the secretaries who typed them, was about \$106 per page. Projecting the \$106 per page cost to the 647 descriptions, the salary costs alone were about \$299,000. If the time used by supervisors to review the descriptions and the printing costs were included, the total cost would be higher. We furnished our cost data to NCI's executive officer, who said that our estimates were reasonable.

We interviewed 8 of the 37 intramural laboratory and branch chiefs from NCI's three divisions. Their staffs had prepared about 30 percent of the project descriptions included in NCI's fiscal 1980 annual reports. Six of them stated that, although the descriptions contain some useful information, the cost benefit of preparing them was

^{1/}Computer Retrieval Information on Scientific Projects.

questionable. All eight laboratory and branch chiefs said they have daily contact with their staffs and several times a year hold staff meetings, at which principal investigators present their work to a group of colleagues. Similarly, the scientific directors of the three divisions stated that, while it is useful for researchers to prepare descriptions of their projects, the costs incurred to prepare them may exceed the benefit derived.

The Director of NCI believed that the site visit reports were a much more valuable management tool than the annual reports. These reports are prepared by non-Federal experts who review NIH's in-house laboratory and branch operations about every 3 years.

USE OF PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS BY OTHER NIH INSTITUTES

The fiscal year 1980 annual reports for the other nine NIH institutes with intramural research programs contained a total of 1,588 project descriptions. We discussed the effort used to prepare these descriptions and their use with the scientific directors from five of the nine institutes and with 10 laboratory and branch chiefs from eight of the nine institutes. The 10 laboratory and branch chiefs were randomly selected from a list of 101 laboratories and branches within the nine institutes.

Five laboratory and branch chiefs told us that less than 1 day was used to prepare the descriptions, while the other five said it took 1 to 5 days. Only three laboratory and branch chiefs reported using the descriptions. Most of them believed that others, such as scientific directors, used them. The point most frequently made in support of the descriptions is that researchers benefit from summarizing their ongoing and future work.

The laboratory and branch chiefs varied in their opinions about whether the project descriptions should be eliminated. Two believed they could be discontinued, three believed that they should be continued, and the other five said they needed additional information before commenting.

One scientific director we contacted said that the annual reports are of little value and seldom read. Two other directors said that, while the detailed project

descriptions help keep them informed about the research being done, they could manage without them. The other two scientific directors believed that the project descriptions could be shortened to 1 to 2 pages.

Since several NIH officials believed that the greatest benefit of preparing project descriptions is that it requires researchers to think about what they have done and what they plan to do, we examined the descriptions prepared for NCI and the other nine institutes for fiscal year 1980 to see whether they addressed the areas required by the instructions. These include research (1) objectives, (2) methods employed, (3) major findings, (4) significance, and (5) proposed course of research.

The detailed project descriptions were occasionally 1 page or less. In some cases, research findings or proposed course of research were not discussed. In other cases, no project description was written at all. Because of this and the fact that some staffs used less than 1 day to prepare their descriptions, we question whether the detailed descriptions received the careful consideration needed to adequately discuss what had been accomplished over the past year and what research work was planned.

OTHER SOURCES EXIST FOR PROJECT INFORMATION

At present, there are other means for obtaining some of the information in the project descriptions. For example, many of the laboratory and branch chiefs have frequent staff meetings at which researchers discuss their ongoing work. In addition, during the site visits which are held about every 3 years, researchers prepare detailed presentations of their past work and plans for future work and also present and defend their work before a group of experts. In addition, researchers prepare a list of publications they have written for inclusion in an annual NIH bibliography. These activities and publications would appear to reduce the need for detailed project descriptions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that the requirement for the detailed project description could be eliminated for NCI. Such action could result in substantial cost savings without adversely affecting NCI's scientific managers. Additional savings could result

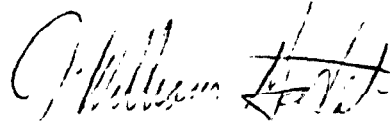
if the requirement were also eliminated for the other NIH institutes.

Accordingly, we recommend that the requirement to prepare detailed project descriptions for NCI intramural research projects be eliminated. Information prepared should be limited to that required to complete PHS Form 6040. We also recommend that you reevaluate the requirement for detailed project descriptions for the other NIH institutes.

- - - -

We would appreciate being advised of any action you take on this matter. We are sending copies of this letter to the Chairman, Subcommittee on General Oversight and Investigations, Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, and the HHS Assistant Inspector General for Auditing.

Sincerely yours,



J. William Gadsby
Group Director