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October 7, 2003

Nelda Wray, M.D., M.P.H.  
Chief Research and Development Officer  
Veterans Health Administration  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Dr. Wray:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments and suggestions on the Office of Research and Development's (ORD) suggested guidelines for measuring investigator productivity.

The peer review process is the hallmark of an outstanding research program, and we think that investigator productivity is an essential part of that process and should remain so. However, as was evident at the recent AAMC VA-Deans Liaison Committee meeting, there is some disagreement as to how productivity should be taken into account in peer review. The AAMC strongly believes that assessment of the contributions and productivity of an investigator has always been and should remain an integral part of the peer review process, along with such other factors as scientific and programmatic relevance, feasibility and novelty. Further, we believe that to substitute for expert peer judgment any kind of arbitrary numerical schema for assessing productivity would be unwise and undermine the merit review process.

Peer review is best done by experts in the particular field of study, and it is those experts who are most capable of fairly and reliably judging an investigator's productivity and contribution to the field of study. Rates of publication are highly dependent on the scientific area, the maturity of the discipline and applicable experimental technology, and the specific problem under investigation. One solid paper may represent a contribution to science and medicine that far outweighs dozens of trivial publications that may pad bibliographies and dazzle inexperienced assessors. All of us with long experience in evaluating grant proposals and faculty achievement have encountered too frequently examples of the latter case, and it is that experience that makes us wary of seductively simple and ostensibly "more quantitative" numerical templates for evaluating productivity. It is quality, not quantity, of publications that should be the basis of evaluation, and no numerical schema can substitute here for experience, expertise, and seasoned judgment. We strongly support the positions expressed by several members of your "Scientific Productivity National Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel" in maintaining that peer review committees already implicitly include productivity in their review decisions, and arguing against the proposed new guidelines. It is the AAMC's position that if current reviewers are unable or unwilling to make such assessments fairly but rigorously in discharging their peer review responsibilities, it is the composition of the committees that should be changed, not the structure of the merit review system.

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We were interested to hear your statement at the Oct. 1 AAIM - VA research summit that ORD is no longer proposing to use number of publications as a specific criterion, and that you are planning to use the quality and impact of an article, not the journal it is published in, as part of your criteria. However, we remind you that “quality” is not equivalent to numerical “impact” calculations, and those calculations are no substitute for direct evaluation of the quality of the papers themselves by expert peers.

Let me reiterate that the AAMC is a strong supporter of the VA research program as an important inducement in recruitment and retention of talented faculty investigators, and in enabling the provision of state-of-the-art health care to our nation’s veterans, especially in the medical subspecialty disciplines. Strong, undiluted peer review is essential to the research program, and my colleagues and I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure the program remains a robust and relevant enterprise of the highest quality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jordan J. Cohen".

Jordan J. Cohen, M.D.