

Report on Research Compliance Volume 17, Number 7. June 25, 2020 NIH Continues to Probe for Untoward Foreign Entanglements in Research; Cases Reach 400

By Theresa Defino

Nearly two years after first raising the alarm over possible foreign influences in research, NIH officials—by their own admission—still do not know the full extent of the problem. But they are currently juggling inquiries into approximately 400 investigators and thus far have determined there *isn't* a problem with fewer than 20%, RRC has learned. Another approximately 20% are “pending,” meaning the agency just doesn't know enough yet.

But for 62%, or 251 investigators that have come to its attention, NIH believes “there may be a problem, and we should contact the institutions,” according to comments the agency provided to RRC that reflect its “internal document review.”

Of this total, NIH has shared data so far on just 189 individuals under investigation, and they are overwhelmingly Asian, male and range in age from 48 to 59, according to Michael Lauer, deputy director for extramural research, whose recent comments marked the first time the agency has discussed the issue in such detail in public.^[1]

Interestingly, three-fourths of the investigators had NIH grants for animal versus human subjects research—a fact that echoes at least one criminal case that was recently resolved. In May, Xiao-Jiang Li, a former Emory University professor who conducted research on Huntington's disease using large animal models, was sentenced to one-year probation for failing to report some \$500,000 in income from two Chinese universities^[2] on his federal tax returns. ^[3]

The details of these cases were part of an update on foreign influences that Lauer gave to the Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD) last month.

Before delving into the cases, Lauer repeated to the ACD “it is important to keep in mind...that U.S. scientists routinely collaborate with investigators in foreign countries.” The problems, Lauer said, “are not problems of collaboration” and stem from a “small portion of scientists working in and with U.S. institutions. We must not reject brilliant minds working honestly and collaboratively to provide hope and healing.”

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