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Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology

----Quality Life Through Research----

October 6, 2004

William R. Steiger, Ph.D.
Special Assistant to the Secretary
for International Affairs
Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, DC

Dear Dr. Steiger:

Thank you for your response, received by Dr. Kincade, to our letter of July 20 concerning your recent articulation of the Department's policy for selection and designation of DHHS scientists as special consultants to the World Health Organization or other international bodies. In our earlier letter, we stated our understanding of the Department's intention to oversee the selection of government scientists for participation in international forums when, *but only when*, the forum's organizers seek those scientists as official representatives of the United States. In such instances, we can certainly appreciate the Department's prerogative to select those who serve as expert consultants or advisors on behalf of the United States government. Even in such circumstances, however, we remain concerned about the *process and criteria* by which the Department plans to evaluate the credentials and suitability of potential expert participants, and we would be grateful for your further clarification of this important matter.

We also stated our position that when government scientists are invited to participate in international forums *not* as official representatives or spokespersons of the United States government, but rather solely as scientists on the basis of their expertise, contributions and international stature, those invitations should not be mediated through the Office of the Secretary at all. Rather, authorization of foreign travel should remain at the level of the local administrative units in which those invited scientists work, and authorization should be limited to an assessment of the demands of the workplace and budgetary considerations. We argue that judging the qualifications of invitees, and the pertinence of their qualifications to the goals of the forum, can best be done by the forum sponsors themselves, and the evaluation of the needs and resources of the invitees' units, by their proximate supervisors. In this circumstance, the newly articulated interposition of the Office of the Secretary into the unit-based process only raises fears of political litmus tests that we would deplore.

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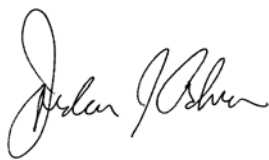
If the policy you articulate is based on a departmental position that federal scientists are *per se* always official representatives of the United States Government whenever they engage in scientific communication, then we would rejoin that it contradicts our own lengthy experience and understanding in the biomedical and health sciences, and that of tens of thousands of our scientist members. Such a position could not have produced the extraordinary record of capability and accomplishment of scientists employed in PHS agencies over the decades, which record is respected throughout the world and has brought enormous health and economic benefits, as well as enviable reputation to this nation. That record is due both to the high standards set for PHS science and a nurturing research environment animated by and dependent upon a fundamental respect for scientific freedom, including freedom from political influence, selection, or suppression.

Pending further clarification, we remain deeply concerned that the policy you have articulated in fact represents a major change and a severe abridgement of the scientific freedom of PHS scientists. The policy threatens not only the continued extraordinary quality of PHS science but the health of our nation and the world.

Sincerely,



Paul W. Kincade, Ph.D.
President
Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology



Jordan J. Cohen, M.D.
President
Association of American Medical Colleges

Cc: Secretary Thompson