

SCIENCE SCOPE

More Political Heat on NIH

The U.S. Congress is ramping up its investigations into how the National Institutes of Health (NIH) monitors financial conflicts of interest among grantees.

One high-profile case involves Harvard University and Massachusetts General Hospital child psychiatrist Joseph Biederman. Last week, as first reported in *The New York Times*, Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) alleged that Biederman and two colleagues had failed to report to their institutions hundreds of thousands of dollars in income from consulting for a half-dozen or so drug companies. Grassley has asked Harvard whether the researchers broke university rules that prohibit faculty members from conducting clinical trials of products made by companies from whom they have received payments exceeding \$20,000. Grassley, who has accused NIH Director Elias Zerhouni of "lax" oversight of extramural research, wants to require drug companies to report all payments to physicians in a public database.

Also last week, two Republicans on the House Energy and Commerce Committee asked Zerhouni to look into whether two Cornell University researchers studying a new screening test for lung cancer had to disclose a financial stake in the study's outcome. Democrats on the committee have leveled similar accusations at rival researchers leading an NIH-funded clinical trial (*Science*, 2 May, p. 602).

Harvard and NIH say investigations are under way, including a "systemwide review of policies" at NIH. In the past, NIH has said it lacks the authority to directly monitor conflicts of interest involving its grantees and instead relies on universities to police themselves. Grassley's letter to NIH says he is looking at cases involving more than 20 other universities.

—JOCELYN KAISER