

## US Government targets foreign researchers



The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) have accused 180 foreign scientists of undisclosed financial conflicts of interest and other wrongdoing and have referred at least 18 of them to federal investigators for possible debarment, raising concerns about disruption of international medical research collaborations. Most cases involved Chinese researchers, but concerns also exist about scientists from other countries, such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

"I was surprised by the extent of the allegations", said Roy Wilson (Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA), co-chair of a NIH working group on foreign influences on research integrity. "Scientific collaboration is a keystone of biomedical research and helps tremendously; I worry about an overreaction that could stifle continued progress."

US Government-funded medical research increasingly involves foreign researchers and international collaborations. More than 50 000 NIH-funded scientific papers were published by US and Chinese co-authors between 1998 and 2018, and more than 6200 in 2018 alone—up from 1754 papers in 2008 and 159 in 1998 (figure).

Most foreign researchers working in the USA have not been accused, but amid rising trade tensions between China and the USA and concerns about Chinese hacking and intellectual property thefts, the allegations and political rhetoric of US lawmakers have raised alarm among foreign scientists in the USA, said Fred Cate, Vice President for Research at Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA.

In 2016, the FBI discovered that an ethnically Chinese NIH peer-reviewer at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center (Houston, TX, USA) had shared grant proposals inappropriately.

In August, 2018, NIH Director Francis Collins warned in a letter to US research institutions of systematic programmes to influence and exploit federal funding

decisions through the NIH peer-review process and noted that the Chinese Government's Thousand Talents programme has recruited thousands of top-tier scientists across disciplines at US institutions.

Emory University (Atlanta, GA, USA) subsequently fired two Chinese researchers. The MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston has completed five investigations into NIH allegations that also involved Chinese researchers. Investigators' reports provided to *The Lancet Oncology* substantiated allegations against three researchers, but concluded that the violations of two of them were not cases of wilful wrongdoing. Wayne State University (Detroit, MI, USA) similarly concluded that allegations against a foreign researcher did not warrant disciplinary action.

Substantiated allegations against the three Chinese scientists at MD Anderson included failures to disclose paid positions at Chinese Government research institutions, abuses of the NIH peer-review process, and unauthorised sharing of other scientists' data and intellectual property with Chinese institutions. Those three scientists resigned when MD Anderson initiated termination procedures. Other universities, which the NIH refused to identify, have also reportedly fired researchers but have not publicly disclosed details.

"Universities will likely begin auditing or spot-checking scientists' disclosures, but it is important that be done across the board without targeting researchers from any particular country", Wilson said. That will require "a new mindset", noted Scott Kennedy of the Center for Strategic & International Studies, Washington, DC, USA. He briefed NIH working group members on issues related to China at a meeting in December, 2018.

Applications for NIH research funding routinely require disclosure of previous and existing funding sources, which

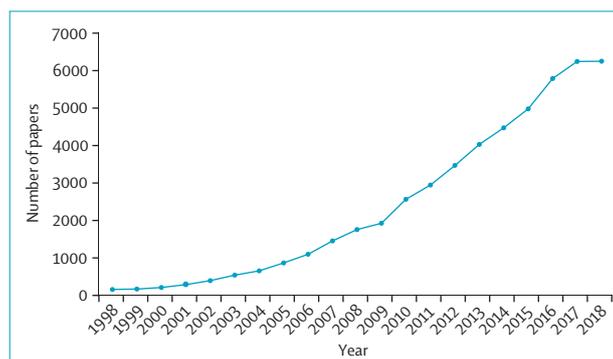


Figure: NIH-funded scientific papers published by US and Chinese coauthors between 1998 and 2018

allows grant reviewers to assess the applicants' available time for proposed research, Cate commented. "Nobody thought of it as a conflict of interest disclosure." However, NIH officials presented the new interpretation as a long-standing conflict disclosure, he added.

"NIH's interpretation of conflicts of interest caused concerns at our member institutions", acknowledged Heather Pierce, senior director of science policy at the Association of American Medical Colleges (Washington, DC, USA). "Over time, there will be consensus, but we're not there now."

The US Government's expectation that universities restrict what medical research can be shared with other countries and independently investigate researchers' disclosures was a surprise and places them at "cross purposes", Cate said. "We're actually required by law to make federally funded research data available to people who ask for it", he said. "If there's to be a new national imperative not to share research data outside the USA, then one good place to start would be for Congress to change the requirements."

"There's no question but that we can be hampering or restricting international collaboration", Cate said. "It's not a one-way street. We're not the source of all knowledge here in the United States."

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