



NALGAP

National Association of Lesbian and Gay Addiction Professionals ■ Serving the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Communities Since 1979

www.nalgap.org

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May 1, 2003

Hon. Tommy Thompson, Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S. W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The board of directors of the National Association of Lesbian and Gay Addiction Professionals (NALGAP) joins many other public health professionals and medical scientists in expressing deep concern over reports that the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is attempting to censor DHHS funding applications. These strictures include the use of language, and, by implication, the design of research that could lead to improved knowledge and practice with regard to such diverse health problems as HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, and other health problems.

Specifically, articles published on April 18, 2003 in both the journal *Science*, and in the *New York Times*, report that National Institutes of Health (NIH) staff have cautioned researchers to avoid using a number of words and phrases in their proposals for AIDS funding. NALGAP has received confidential reports from two AIDS researchers of meetings with other DHHS agencies during which Federal staff gave similar warnings. Supporting the reports in *Science* and the *New York Times*, a colleague told us that he believes this to be “an HHS-wide policy.” We also learned that staff of a government contractor was asked by an HHS agency project officer to replace “homophobia” in a draft document, and warned that “transgender” would probably be dropped, too.

Notwithstanding these reports, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 21, 2003) quotes NIH spokesperson John T. Burklow and HHS spokesperson Bill Hall, both of whom appear to deny that any such policy, written or unwritten, exists within DHHS or at the NIH. Since their comments to *The Chronicle* contradict not only other press reports but the first-hand accounts we have received, the NALGAP board of directors requests confirmation that HHS is not seeking to suppress references to the various words and terms cited in the recent media reports in federal grant proposals, the grant awards themselves, or in other materials describing proposed and conducted AIDS research. *The Chronicle* account also suggests that federal employees within your department may be acting without authority out of their own biases or in anticipation that you and other members of the current administration would support their cautions to AIDS researchers.

We in the United States are privileged to reside in the nation most respected for its landmark health and medical science research. Consistently, American scientists have forged new pathways that have led to findings that improve the health status of our diverse population, and that of countless millions of others throughout the world. We are most well known, perhaps, for pioneering efforts to bridge scientific knowledge and health services. However, if the reports described in this letter are accurate, these pathways will be largely blocked. As a well-known and highly respected researcher has noted:

“...the idea that grants might be subject to political surveillance was creating a ‘pernicious sense of insecurity’ among researchers.” (Dr. Alfred Sommer, Dean, Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health)

We are confident that as the leader of our Nation’s efforts to assure all Americans of access to science-based health information and appropriate services, and as Chairman of the Global AIDS Forum, you will agree that HIV/AIDS, like other infectious diseases, recognizes no political, religious, or “moral” code. We look forward to learning how you will communicate this basic concept to HHS personnel and to the American people who have entrusted you with their hopes for good health. Specifically, we request that you:

- ❑ Issue a DHHS department-wide memorandum clarifying DHHS policy with respect to proposals submitted to the Department, affirming that HHS staff have no authority to “caution” or “warn” prospective grantees as to politically acceptable language for their proposals; and
- ❑ Release this memorandum to the health and popular media, and the public at large through posting at appropriate DHHS agency websites. .

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter with you. Given the international implications related to U.S. government funding for health and medical science research, we further recommend that you convene a policy forum to discuss issues related to the conduct of health research that touch upon ethical, social, religious and political sensitivities. We would be pleased to support you in planning for and convening such a forum, and believe that this would again demonstrate U.S. leadership in public health and a commitment to unbiased scientific inquiry.

Sincerely,

Joe Amico, M.Div., C.A.S.
President
NALGAP Board of Director