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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D C 20548

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MANPOWER AND WELFARE
DIVISION

B-161475

JAN 13 1975

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The Honorable Malcolm R Currie
Director of Defense Research and Engineering

Dear Mr Currie

We surveyed the administration and management of Department of Defense medical research laboratories and identified certain matters--the management of laboratory equipment and the control of laboratory notebooks--which we believe need further management attention

One of the recommendations in this report (see p 3) relates to equipment management in medical research laboratories Our office, on January 8, 1975, sent to the Department of Defense for comment, a report which addresses equipment management practices in all Government laboratories In deciding what action to take on the equipment management recommendation in this report, consideration should be given to the recommendations contained in the report which discusses equipment management in all Government laboratories

Our survey was performed at the Office of the Director of Defense Research and Engineering, the Army's Medical Research and Development Command, the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, the Air Force's Office of Deputy Chief of Staff for Research and Development, and the following medical research laboratories

Army

- Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Washington, D C.
- Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases,
Fort Detrick, Maryland
- Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine, Natick,
Massachusetts
- Army Medical Bioengineering Research and Development
Laboratory, Fort Detrick, Maryland

Navy

- Navy Medical Research Institute, Bethesda, Maryland
- Naval Submarine Medical Research Laboratory, Groton,
Connecticut
- Naval Blood Research Laboratory, Chelsea, Massachusetts

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LABORATORY EQUIPMENT MANAGEMENT

In a November 1970 report to the Congress entitled "Need for Improved Laboratory Equipment Management Procedures" (B-160140), we recommended that DOD

- Require laboratory management to conduct systematic, documented walk-throughs to identify unneeded and little-used equipment. The equipment could then be redistributed within the laboratories, placed in equipment pools, made available to other Government agencies, or declared excess.
- Require the use of equipment pools and issue instructions explaining how to set up and operate a pool.

We also recommended that the military audit agencies include in their scheduled reviews verification that laboratories were adequately complying with equipment management procedures.

In response to our report, DOD stated that to implement these recommendations it was preparing policies for managing laboratory and research equipment. DOD, however, has never issued instructions to the services regarding periodic walk-throughs and equipment pools. We were told by a representative of your division, that a draft instruction had been prepared, but that it was never issued because DOD found that the services were conducting walk-throughs and using equipment pools.

The requirements for periodic walk-throughs and equipment pools vary among the services.

- The Army has issued a regulation which requires walk-throughs and equipment pools.
- The Air Force has no specific regulation, but we were told that procedures for walk-throughs and equipment pools are included in a Project Scientific Handbook which is part of the laboratories' standard operating procedures.
- The Navy has no requirements because, according to a Navy official, work in medical research laboratories does not lend itself to this type of equipment management.

Two of the Army laboratories we visited--the Research Institute of Environmental Medicine and the Medical Bioengineering Research and Development Laboratory--did not maintain equipment pools because of space limitations.

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The Naval Blood Research Laboratory was the only Navy laboratory we visited which maintained an equipment pool. Officials at the other two Navy laboratories said that equipment pools were not maintained because of space limitations.

During our visit at the Navy Medical Research Institute, we observed numerous items of idle equipment stored in hallways and other places. We were told by laboratory employees that this equipment was not being used and was not needed. One researcher told us that while rummaging for equipment in the basement of the laboratory he found an unused piece of equipment that cost about \$45,000.

A 1972 Policy Advisory Council report to the commanding officer of the Navy Medical Research Institute stated that

"Major equipment items seem to have been procured to fill immediate and often temporary needs. They often were purchased using funds of a given work unit, thus enhancing the proprietary feeling for continued possession and often sole use when another investigator needs such equipment. Potential borrowers are therefore forced to buy duplicate instruments."

Although the report noted that there was a possible site for an equipment pool, one had not been established at the time of our visit.

Officials of the Army and Air Force audit agencies advised us that their audit programs provide for compliance evaluation of all aspects of laboratory equipment management, including equipment pools and periodic walk-throughs. Officials of the Navy Audit Service, however, said they have not been reviewing laboratory equipment usage primarily because there are no directives requiring laboratories to maintain equipment pools or to conduct periodic walk-throughs.

We believe that DOD has not adequately considered the recommendations contained in our May 1970 report which were aimed at strengthening laboratory equipment management.

RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that you issue instructions to the services on walk-through inspections and the use of equipment pools. These instructions should be in accordance with our prior recommendations (see p. 2).

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AGENCY COMMENT

In September 1974, we discussed this matter with the Assistant Director for Environmental and Life Sciences who concurred that in order to ensure uniformity among the services, DOD should issue an instruction on walk-through inspections and the use of equipment pools.

LABORATORY NOTEBOOKS

DOD has no uniform instructions requiring the services to control laboratory notebooks. As a result, practices vary among the services. The Army and Air Force control notebooks while the Navy does not. The Army instruction states that an important purpose of recording every investigation is to provide legal evidence of the data and completeness of an invention because this evidence is invaluable in patent infringement suits brought against the Government. The four Army laboratories included in our survey were complying with this regulation.

An official in the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery's Research Division told us that laboratory notebooks were not important since all of the investigator's work is either published in scientific journals or termination reports.

One Naval laboratory we visited--the Naval Blood Research Laboratory--controlled notebooks. The officer in charge of the laboratory said the system was established about 10 years ago, shortly after an investigator, who had been working at the laboratory, took all his original notes when he departed. This investigator went to an academic institution where he continued his work, published professional articles, took full credit for the development, and received a patent. The Navy contested the patent because the bulk of the work was performed at the Navy laboratory. The Navy, however, was unable to sustain its position because it did not have sufficient documentation. There were no formal operating procedures for the system at this laboratory.

RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that you issue an instruction requiring uniform control of laboratory notebooks by the services. This would help enhance the protection of the Government's rights to the results of research and development projects funded by the Government.

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AGENCY COMMENT

In September 1974, we discussed this matter with the Assistant Director for Environmental and Life Sciences who concurred that an overall DOD instruction should be issued regarding the control of laboratory notebooks

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We appreciate the courtesy and cooperation our representatives received during this survey and would like to be advised of any action you plan or take in regard to these matters

Sincerely yours,



Thomas P McCormick
Assistant Director

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