



NIEHS Spotlight

- [EEO Office: One Mission, Many Roles](#)
- [Health Disparities: A Looming Challenge](#)
- [Duke's Maurice Wallace Speaks at NIEHS MLK Program](#)
- [Blacks in Government: Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday "A Day On, Not a Day Off"](#)
- [Black History Month Observance will Focus on Obesity](#)



Science Notebook

- [New NIH Conflict of Interest Regulations Issued](#)
- [Eleventh Report on Carcinogens Draws Media Attention](#)
- [David Schwartz's Presentation On-Line](#)



After Hours

- [Maria Orraca Makes the Most of her Commute](#)



Did You Know?

- [News Faces](#)
- [Up and Coming](#)



NIEHS Spotlight

EEO Office: One Mission, Many Roles

Kathy Odenwald takes her job very seriously, but that does not mean she can't enjoy it.

For Odenwald, who heads the Equal Employment Opportunity Office at NIEHS, it's all about people. Her cheerful and bubbly personality makes her a natural for social interaction – casual chats that actually provide valuable insight into the NIEHS work environment.



Virginia Ivanoff and Kathy Odenwald are now NIH employees, but will remain at NIEHS. The EEO Office, one of several offices consolidated with NIH as of Oct. 1, 2004, takes a proactive approach to EEO issues.

Under the law, all employees have the right to work and advance on the basis of merit and ability. The law further requires fairness and consistency in management practices to ensure those rights. The scope of EEO activities extends well beyond the law and into the arena of helping people reach their potential. Satisfied employees are always better employees, and Odenwald makes it her business to monitor the work environment.

It is not uncommon to find Odenwald in her office, chatting over tea with NIEHS employees and department heads about work issues. This is one of Odenwald's

methods of keeping her finger on the pulse of the work environment, and it enables her to identify issues that, when identified early, can sometimes be diverted before they become problems. The EEO serves not only government employees, but also contractors who do not have an on-site supervisor, post-doctoral researchers and visiting fellows.

The EEO Office has four major functions designed to improve the working environment: complaint management, affirmative employment, which used to be called affirmative action, national outreach and cultural education.

The objective of complaint management within EEO is to resolve the problem at the lowest possible level. Informal complaints are handled through EEO counselors and the NIH Alternative Dispute Resolution Center. Formal complaints are channeled to NIH and the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Affirmative Employment Program, another vital function of the office also dictated by law, is not about color and race, Odenwald said. Ethnic representation in the work force is not based on simple demographics, but on a more complex formula to ensure the work force reflects the diversity of the civilian labor force. Closely tied to that program are national outreach activities designed to encourage minority college students to be trained at NIEHS. That experience is invaluable as they start their career paths.

Odenwald prefers a proactive approach to EEO issues. She routinely issues e-mail bulletins to supervisors, educating them about EEO issue and presenting analysis. For example, a recent bulletin addressed how to evaluate whether the existence of a heavy accent is a valid criterion for an employment decision. Another e-mail addressed age discrimination issues.

Meanwhile, Virginia Ivanoff, EEO specialist, focuses on educating the masses. She is a non-voting member of the NIEHS Diversity Council, which was formed by the director. The council acts as an advisory body to the director and promotes an inclusive working environment. The EEO Office and the Diversity Council co-sponsor a number of cultural education activities including presentations by NIEHS researchers about their home countries, languages and cultures. The EEO also offers language classes for NIEHS employees. Among the languages offered in the past are Japanese, Spanish, French, Arabic and American Sign Language. The EEO and the Diversity Council co-sponsor ethnic history month activities such as Black History Month in February.

“Learning about different cultures and languages is like building bridges. It creates understanding,” Ivanoff said.

The NIEHS EEO is also a source of information on ways to improve job skills or find jobs more suited to someone’s specific skills. Ivanoff compiles a list of federal jobs open in North Carolina and posts it weekly in the announcements folder.

As of Oct. 1, 2004, when the federal fiscal year began, the NIEHS EEO was absorbed by NIH as part of an overall restructuring that also consolidated human resources and facilities-management functions. Odenwald and Ivanoff are among 50 EEO employees consolidated under NIH. They are assigned to the Division of IC Services. They will remain at NIEHS as will Gerard Roman, who is now assigned to the Division of Policy Planning, Programs and Diversity Management in the NIH EEO Office.

Health Disparities: A Looming Challenge

The disparity between the health of white Americans and black Americans was the topic of W. E. B. DuBois’s presentation in 1906 at Atlanta University. His paper, “The Health and Physique of the Negro American,” focused on diseases that disproportionately affect black Americans. DuBois and others initiated action to address health disparities, and black schools and churches took the lead, reaching out to assist those in their communities.

In the 1950s, however, that responsibility was taken over by the U.S. Public Health Service. Some 30 years later, in 1985, then Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler officially identified a gap in healthcare that left blacks and other minorities with inferior healthcare.

In 1990, NIH established the Office of Research on Minority Health, and 10 years after that, it became the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities. The legislation that established and funded the NCMHD also added the element of socioeconomic disadvantage to the group of risk factors for health disparities.

But today, many of the same problems identified by DuBois and Heckler continue to plague minority populations. High blood pressure, high cholesterol and high triglycerides, stroke, diabetes and some forms of cancer are among the diseases that disproportionately affect black Americans. Obesity, which research has tied to many other health problems, too, is disproportionately higher among black Americans.

NIEHS Director Ken Olden said he believes health disparities are the result of a set of complex factors, including socio-economic factors, access to healthcare and bias by health-care providers, biological and environmental factors, cultural beliefs, public policies and individual behaviors. Those factors interact to afflict the poor – and large numbers of minorities – with disproportionate levels of disease.

Marian Johnson-Thompson, director of education and biomedical research at NIEHS said research on Hispanic, Asian, and African people shows some health disparities that do not exist in their native countries develop when they immigrate to the U. S.

Johnson-Thompson will make a presentation on the Niagara Movement, in which DuBois played a lead role, at the NIH African American History program Feb. 14. That movement started in 1905. It was the first significant black organized protest of the 20th century, and among the demands was equality in healthcare.

Johnson-Thompson said the factors that result in health disparities are very complex. They include access to jobs; housing; education and healthcare; the kind and quality of healthcare received; and the quality of housing and everyday environmental exposures, in addition to the unique pollutants in minority and poor neighborhoods.

Johnson-Thompson said it is vital to recruit minorities into the areas of health research, health policy, and education. By establishing influence in those areas, minorities will begin to make progress toward solving issues related to health disparities.

Black History Month Observance will Focus on Obesity

The Research Triangle Park Chapter of Blacks in Government and the NIEHS Office of Clinical Research will observe Black History Month with a health disparities panel discussion on obesity Feb. 24 from 10 a.m. to noon in conference room 101B of the Rodbell Auditorium.

The presentation will be the fourth of an annual series on health disparities. This year's theme is "Obesity: A Leading Predictor for Health Disparities and Early Death." Obesity is a high risk factor for several health disparities illnesses and for early death. A question-and-answer session will follow the panel discussion.

Panelists include LaVerne Reid, chair and associate professor in the Department of Health Education at North Carolina Central University; Nadine Godwin-Blake, executive director of Child Nutrition Services in Durham Public Schools; an African American woman who participated in a weight-loss clinical study at Duke University; and Laura Svetkey, director of the Duke Hypertension Center and co-investigator of the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension trial. Panelists will discuss exercise, nutrition, fad diets, diet choices for children, the role of the public school system, clinical trials, and recent revisions to the Food Pyramid.

The economic toll of obesity-related health conditions makes it an issue that affects everyone, said Marian Johnson-Thompson, the director of education and biomedical research development at NIEHS. Previous health-disparities health education presentations covered prostate cancer, lupus and uterine fibroids.

To fully understand human disease, researchers must also delve into those social factors that cause disproportionately negative outcomes in health among ethnic and medically underserved groups, Johnson-Thompson said.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton issued a national apology for the Tuskegee syphilis study. According to a National Public Radio account of the study, nearly 400 poor black men with syphilis in Macon County, Ala., were studied by the Public Health Service, working with the Tuskegee Institute, beginning in 1932. The men were never told they had syphilis, and they were never treated for it. Many died from the disease and related conditions. In his 1997 apology, Clinton said that 25 years after the Tuskegee study, there was very little participation by African Americans in clinical trials. The lack of participation seriously impedes efforts to conduct promising research and to provide adequate healthcare to all people, Clinton said.

Duke's Maurice Wallace Speaks at NIEHS MLK Program



Maurice Wallace, Duke University assistant professor and the featured speaker at NIEHS's Martin Luther King Jr. program Jan. 12, said in his presentation, "Changes between Now and Then" that today, more than ever, we need to stand against injustice and reach out to those in need.



Veronica Godfrey, of the NIEHS Diversity Council, presents Maurice Wallace with a MLK program poster.



NIEHS MLK Ensemble – Denise Tyre, Denise Warren-Hinton, Shalon Kee, Elliott Gilmer, George Kimble, and Jennie Foushee – performed two gospel songs in honor of King.

Wallace challenged NIEHS employees to keep working to make King's dream a reality. Wallace urged people to be benevolent with those in need, citing events like the Tsunami in December and the war in Iraq.

The audience of about 80 employees gave Wallace a standing ovation, and as is customary, he received a poster announcing the NIEHS MLK program.

Blacks in Government: Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday “A Day On, Not a Day Off”

Durham City Manager Patrick Baker told members of Blacks in Government that much work remains to be done to achieve the dream of Martin Luther King Jr.

Baker heard the stories of the civil rights movement as a child. His parent told him about their own struggles. His father, who became a career Marine, could not get into Wake Forest University because he was black. Today, Baker said, the issues civil rights leaders face are different, less clear than those faces by early civil rights leaders.

As city manager of Durham, Baker is charged with, among other things, trying to improve the city’s image, which is marred by crime statistics. Gang activity in Durham is one of the issues he deals with, and one that affects the black community.

Baker described the issue as “a fight for the next generation of citizens” whose struggle for survival draws them to gangs.



Kimberly Peterson, administrative specialist at NIEHS and BIG president, presents Durham City Manager Patrick Baker with a plaque of appreciation for his presentation on Jan. 19 as part of the BIG Martin Luther King Jr. celebration at the EPA campus.

For the City of Durham, that means getting a grip on crime and the perception of crime. Baker said the criminal justice system is a broken, overburdened system, one that is managed by the state and the county and one in which the city has little control. When violent criminals are locked up, they are angrier and more violent by the time they get out, he said.

“I’d like to take more of a public/private partnership to solve this problem,” Baker said. Partnering with private enterprise and non-profits would provide more resources than are available from city alone, he said.

Baker described Durham as one of the most diverse communities in the state, but the positive aspects of the community are overshadowed by crime – actual and perceived. Run-down neighborhoods are magnets for crime, and have significantly higher incidence of prostitution, drug sales, violence and robberies, he said. To address the problem, the discussion must include economic development and neighborhood revitalization, he said.



Science Notebook

New NIH Conflict of Interest Regulations Issued

New conflict of interest regulations will require NIH scientists to cut all consulting ties with pharmaceutical and biotech companies within 30 days. Scientists can request an additional 30 days to comply, if needed, but the absolute deadline to comply is 90 days.

The new rules bar NIH scientists from working for companies, organizations, nonprofits and universities that receive agency grants. The rules apply to both paid and unpaid positions. However, work that is strictly academic, such as teaching and writing or editing textbook material, still will be allowed with prior authorization.

The new rules specifically prohibit employees from engaging in outside employment with biotech and pharmaceutical companies, health care providers, health insurers, health trade or professional organizations, and institutions that are NIH grantees.

NIH Director Elias Zerhouni announced the new rules at a Feb. 1 press conference. The new rules were published in the Federal Register Feb. 3, and immediately went into effect as part of a Department of Health and Human Services interim final rule that amends existing rules.

NIH officials said they plan to evaluate the effect of the new rules on recruitment and retention when the rules have been in place for a while. “Frankly, I think it was more important for an agency that funds grants and evaluates research to hold itself to a different standard than the rest of the world,” Zerhouni said at the press conference.

Senior staff who are required to file financial disclosure reports will not be allowed to own any stock or other financial holdings in biotechnology, pharmaceutical or device companies, and will have 150 days to divest such interests, unless the financial interest is part of a diversified mutual fund. Other employees can have no more than \$15,000 invested in any one company, except when the holding is part of a pension from previous employment. The restrictions on financial interests also apply to spouses and minor children.

Zerhouni and other NIH officials who spoke at the press conference said the appearance of a conflict of interest is just as damaging as an actual conflict of interest. The new regulations include a table of penalties for violation, with the penalties ranging from counseling an employee to removing that employee from his or her position based on the severity of the offense. NIH will also generate a list of

acceptable awards as well as create a list of who may receive them. Most employees will be able to accept the honor, if not the money.

“Nothing is more important for NIH than preserving the public trust – in our advice, our time and our ability to provide public health advice that has no taint of conflict of interest,” Zerhouni said.

Executive Officer Rich Freed was appointed as deputy ethics counselor at NIEHS. Janice Strother will continue to serve as the NIEHS ethics coordinator. Requests for prior approval, questions about the new regulations and procedures should be sent to Freed or Strother. Freed said NIH will continue to provide additional information on the new regulations by posting it at: http://www.nih.gov/about/ethics_COI.htm.

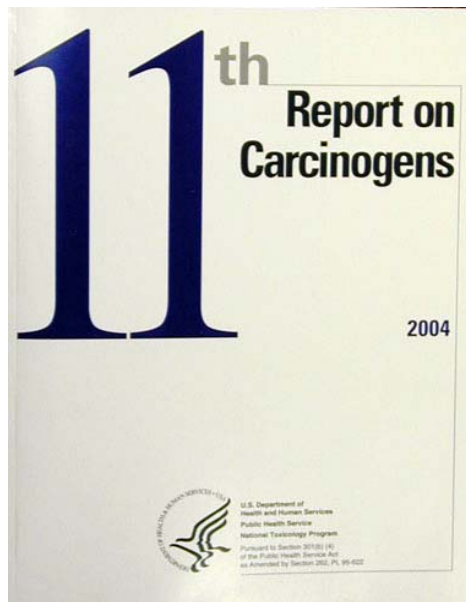
NIH Ethics Officer Holli Beckerman-Jaffe and her staff are developing additional guidance for NIH employees, and Freed said she advises people not to divest prohibited stock until NIH provides certificates of divestiture necessary to help offset capital gains for income-tax purposes.

Eleventh Report on Carcinogens Draws Media Attention

The *Eleventh Report on Carcinogens* helped NIEHS start off the year with a bang in the form of a media blitz. Hundreds of news articles appeared within 24 hours from the time the report was released Jan. 31.

Among the publications and web sites touting articles on the report: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Washington Times*, Associated Press, Reuters, National Public Radio, and *Science* and *Advances* magazines.

The NIEHS press release issued Jan. 31 contained a link to the National Toxicology Program web page. The NTP site got more than a million hits per day for two days after the announcement.



The “RoC,” as the report is dubbed at NIEHS, lists cancer-causing agents in two categories -- “known to be human carcinogens” and “reasonably anticipated to be human carcinogens.” It is a Congressionally-mandated report generated by the NTP and updated every two years.

For the first time ever, viruses were added to the list. Hepatitis B and C viruses and some human papillomaviruses, which cause common sexually transmitted diseases, are among the new additions grabbing headlines. A total of 17 substances were added in the Eleventh Edition, for a total of 246 listings. Other new listings include lead and lead compounds, X-rays, compounds found in grilled meats, and a host of substances used in textile dyes, paints and inks.

The report is available on-line at: <http://ntp.niehs.nih.gov>.

David Schwartz’s Presentation On-Line

Think you missed your chance to hear the next director of NIEHS, Dr. David Schwartz, give his presentation to NIH Jan. 13? Think again! “Environmental Genomics: a Key to Understanding Human Disease” was recorded and is available online for NIH employees. The presentation can be viewed by going to <http://videocast.nih.gov/PastEvents.asp?c=4>.



After Hours

Maria Orraca Makes the Most of her Commute

Last summer, Maria Orraca decided to try an alternative means of getting to work. She jumped on her bike and took a series of trails near Ellerby Creek in Durham to get to the downtown bus station, where she placed her bike on a Triangle Transit Authority bus bike rack and rode the bus to Alexander and Highway 54. There, she got back on her bike and was at work within minutes.

All total, it takes about 30 minutes on the bike, and 30 minutes on the bus. Cycling, she said, saves her money, improves her health, invigorates her mind, and frees up more time to spend with her 2-year-old daughter since she doesn't need to squeeze in time for exercise anymore. What more could you possibly ask for in a mode of transportation?

Orraca describes herself as “a budget biker.” When she first started, she had no special equipment. Even the bike she used was just a standard discount brand. Now she sports lined windbreakers and rides a “comfort” bike, with springs on the seat, and higher handle bars, which allow the rider to sit up straight.



“It’s amazing what you can build up to,” Orraca said of her improving physical endurance. She says that when she first started, she was winded by the time she got to the bus station. But a surprise ice storm this past January that gridlocked traffic in the Triangle for hours provided the perfect opportunity for Orraca to find out if she could make the entire distance from work to home. After an hour in gridlock, waiting to get home, Orraca got off the bus and got on her bike. She had no problem going all 13 miles to her home. She said she stuck to riding on the fringe of snow to avoid the ice on the roads that caused the gridlock. She followed the American Tobacco Trail which goes downtown.

“I had the freedom to get where I was going. I couldn’t have done that in a car,” Orraca said.

Orraca said she sees much more wildlife from her bike seat than she did in a car seat, especially on the EPA campus. Recently, as she was leaving campus, she saw a flock of Canada geese take off. One of them flew into a light pole. She took the unconscious goose to the security gate, and a guard called a staff veterinarian, who checked it out and helped get the goose placed in a wildlife rehabilitation center. Orraca gets regular updates on how the goose is doing.



Did You Know?

News Faces

Paul Wade

Paul Wade, investigator in the Laboratory of Molecular Carcinogenesis, is originally from Texas City, Texas. He completed postdoctoral fellowships at NICHD and the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver. He is an assistant professor, adjunct, in the Department of Pathology at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta. His research interests include mechanisms utilized by cells to execute changes in gene expression, with emphasis on chromatin modification enzymes. Current studies focus on the human Mi-2/NuRD complex and its role in gene regulation in mammalian cells.



Robert Dutcher

Robert Dutcher, is a biochemist with many years of industrial research experience. He worked at a major pharmaceutical company and a small biopharmaceutical start-up company. Before joining NIEHS, he was with the biotechnology unit in the agricultural division of BASF in Research Triangle Park.

At NIEHS, he is part of Traci Hall's group in the Laboratory of Structural Biology, working with cloning, expressing, and purifying proteins that play a role in RNA interference (RNAi).

Alan Call

Alan Call is an environmental protection specialist in the Health and Safety Branch. He came to NIEHS from Duke University, where he spent nine years as the Chemical and Radiological Waste Program manager. He has a bachelor's degree in Industrial and Environmental Health Management from Ferris State University, and is a Certified Hazardous Materials manager (master level). He also volunteers as a firefighter with Parkwood Volunteer Fire Department.



Up and Coming

- The NIH Work/Life Center will videocast the following presentations:
 1. The NIH ombudsman will be at NIEHS **Feb. 7-8** for consultation on work-related issues. To schedule an appointment, contact Kevin Jessar on his private line at (301) 594-9550. For more information, go to <http://www4.od.nih.gov/ccr/>.
 2. “Screen Issues: Taming the Electronic Monsters in Your Home.” **Feb. 9.**
 3. “Investments 101.” **Feb. 17.**
 4. “A Nursing Home is not your Only Choice.” **Feb. 23.**

All presentations will be videocast from noon until 1:30 p.m. They can be viewed by going to: <http://videocast.nih.gov>.

- The NIEHS Diversity Council will host the Black History Month presentation **Feb. 16** from 3 to 4 p.m., with Genna Rae McNeil, professor of history at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. The presentation will be held in the Rodbell Auditorium, conference room B.
- The Research Triangle Chapter of Blacks in Government (BIG) and the NIEHS Office of Clinical Research will host the 2005 Black History Month celebration on health disparities. The program, “Obesity: A Leading Predictor for Health Disparities and Early Death,” will be **Feb. 24** from 10 a.m. until noon in the Rodbell Auditorium, conference room 101B. The Office of Management is hosting a Basic Project Officer course **Feb. 28-March 3** at Nottingham Hall. The course requires supervisor approval. To register, go to: <https://nominate.od.nih.gov/login.pl>. For more information, contact Cynthia Radford at 541-1806.
- The NIEHS Work Life Center Career Counselor will be available **Feb. 8** and **Feb. 22** for private, confidential career consultation sessions. To schedule a session, call the NIH Work Life Center at (301) 435-1619. Career counseling is free for NIH employees.


Your On-Line Source for NIEHS News

The e-Factor, which is produced by the Office of Communications and Public Liaison at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, welcomes your comments and suggestions. The e-Factor is published as a communication service to employees of NIEHS.

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- [Colleen Chandler](#), Editor

