Stained Glass Gives CSR Research Integrity Officer a Clear View

By Don Luckett

No one can accuse Dr. Anne Clark of looking at the world through rose-colored glasses. As CSR's Research Integrity Officer, she discerns complex issues related to possible scientific misconduct by applicants and reviewers. And as Associate Director of CSR's Division of Receipt and Referral, she resolves a host of complicated questions dealing with incoming NIH grant applications and their assignment to the most appropriate review venue and NIH Institute or Center.

Bright colors nonetheless blaze in her office when the sun shines through stained glass she has crafted and hung in her windows. She started working in stained glass during a sabbatical in the NIH Clinical Center in 1986. She was hooked with her first piece. "The visual image of having a piece of glass in the window with light coming through it is something that filled me with awe," she says. "I just love it."

Clark's stained glass has a unique way of casting light on her NIH career, since a new creation has come with each new job here. When she took her most recent position at CSR, she hung a piece featuring purple and yellow pansies. "It really struck me," she explains, "that I sometimes have to say 'no' to people, but I need to deal with them in a personable way, and pansies are my role model. They are hardy and resilient, with the ability to weather all situations."

The hardiness that Clark brings to her work is rooted in the experience of running a lab at the University of Maine in Orono, where she studied the structure of glycoproteins and their role in immunosuppression.

She also has spent the last 14 years as an NIH scientific review administrator (SRA). Insights into the peer review process shine through her stained glass. When she first came to CSR in 1991, she made a piece with a quilt-like design. "To me it indicates the patchwork theory of peer review," she says. "If you have an interdisciplinary grant application, you need to bring together reviewers with various types of expertise."

In 1997, Clark joined the review branch at the National, Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. "I made a piece called Fire and Ice," she explains. "When one evaluates a grant application, one does it from the ice point of view, looking at the proposed methods, logic and reasoning etc. But there is also the fire side to it . . . does the application stir the imagination? Is it exciting and groundbreaking?"

Addressing Possible Misconduct

Appreciating the "fire" and "ice" of science certainly helps Clark deal with the complex and emotion-laden issues involved when reviewers or applicants raise questions or concerns about plagiarism, fabrication or falsification in an application or the possible misappropriation of confidential information in their applications. Clark says these individuals are encouraged to contact their SRA. "The SRA should know to contact me," she says, "and maintain confidentiality to ensure that a fair review goes forward while the concerns are addressed."

Clark sorts applications at CSR's "breakout table."

"Merely raising a question will not automatically open up an investigation," she notes. "It will just set in motion a process at which there are several points of looking at it more closely." If Clark thinks further investigation may be warranted, she will present the facts to the NIH Extramural Research Integrity Officer, who may decide that they should be raised with the Office of Research Integrity for the Department of Health and Human Services. She notes that it is a careful, deliberate process. There must be sufficient evidence that there was an intention to deceive. If this appears to be the case, the given academic/research institution may be asked to conduct an investigation. The Office of Research Integrity will review the results and decide to accept or reject them. If a finding of misconduct is made, the investigator may appeal this decision, but if it is denied a recommendation goes to the Assistant Secretary for Health to impose administrative sanctions.

"The investigator can be prohibited from submitting grant applications or face restrictions on future grant applications for a period of time," says Clark. "Investigators may also be prohibited from serving on NIH/DHHS committees." These sanctions can be in effect for a few years or for 5 years to 10 years, depending on the nature of the misconduct.

How Big a Problem?

Many concerns do not become cases. An applicant might forget to mention a collaboration or to put quotation marks around a small borrowed passage that is cited and used without an intention to deceive. "When you consider the thousands of grant applications that we receive every year, I think the magnitude of the problem is quite small," says Clark. "But one case is a big problem. We need a research record we can count on in pursuing new research, making public policies, and taking care of patients."

Working On . . .

"It's a fascinating job," says Clark. "Every day brings a new challenge in problem solving, rendering decisions that are fair, consistent with Government policies, and respectful of the investigators and staff involved." She later explains how she is also fascinated by the subtle shades of the clouds she sees on her way to and from work everyday. These clouds are now working their way into her stained glass. "I started shading them yesterday, and fired a piece in the kiln last night," she says. "I'm going to work on the technique to be able to get a variety of clouds."