

## **Katrina-Battered Researcher and CSR Reviewer Comes Through**

**By Bill Grigg**



Immunologist Seth Pincus fled Children’s Hospital in New Orleans in the wake, literally, of Hurricane Katrina. He had stayed with the patients in the uptown hospital throughout the August 2005 hurricane. In the chaos and loss of power and other services that followed, he helped get patients moved to safe facilities elsewhere. As the hospital’s research director, he agonized over giving pentobarbital to laboratory rats and mice (so they would not die of dehydration and starvation), as well as leaving behind hundreds of fragile blood and tissue samples. He used liquid nitrogen to freeze what he could, then left and set up a temporary base in Baton Rouge.

### **Coming Through for NIH**

Returning to Children’s as soon as possible to see what could be retrieved, he found the cardboard sample holders thick with mold—so much that three weeks of hard, steady work were required to get rid of it. But a lot of the samples he had frozen with liquid nitrogen were still fine.

When CSR’s Scientific Review Administrator Mary Clare Walker called to tell him that, if he was too burdened, he shouldn’t feel he needed to carry out his commitment to chair a November meeting of the [HIV/AIDS Vaccine Study Section](#), he says he nearly cried. “Please,” he said to her, “I want to do it. It’s the only semblance of normality I have left!”

He did chair the November meeting. And the March. And the July Study Section just completed. And he did a full load of reviews of re-submissions. CSR Director, Toni Scarpa, praised his dedication. “As a chair with review experience that spans a decade, Dr. Pincus understands the delicate and vital dynamics of peer review in his study section,” says Dr. Scarpa. “Grant applicants benefit from this kind of continuity, and we are very grateful he served despite the overwhelming situation.” It is heartening to note, he adds that “Dr. Pincus is one of many NIH heroes who give so much to ensure the vitality of NIH peer reviews.”

Dr. Pincus also managed, in his spare time, to help NIH understand the unique needs of its researchers in New Orleans. He estimated that Children’s suffered \$50 million in losses, but added that it was “pretty lucky to be on high ground, whereas Tulane and LSU were in the flood zone. We gave space to 80 investigators from there. We gave them a place to come in and start to get back to work.”



Dr. Seth Pincus

## How NIH Has Come Through

About 280 principal investigators in New Orleans had support from NIH grants when Katrina struck. “Some of the best have taken their work and their grants elsewhere,” Dr. Pincus said. “Drug company-financed clinical trials were often so disrupted that they have been abandoned.”

Initially, NIH helped out by extending the deadlines for research applications for those hit by Katrina, as well as with aid from some of the Institutes. NIH also used administrative supplements to help out, on a case-by-case basis.

In July, after trips to New Orleans to see what research remained or was being revived, NIH offered a simplified method by which its grantees still working in New Orleans could obtain one-year extensions of their grants, with the possibility of an additional \$50,000 supplement to cover unexpected storm-related costs. (Researchers need to reply by Aug. 25, 2006.)

With that aid, Dr. Pincus said, he’s looking forward to forgetting about Katrina and carrying out “a normal program of research” once again.

## Disaster Planning

Forgetting Katrina? Well, not quite. Dr. Pincus thinks he learned the hard way about protecting research samples, animals and subjects from disaster, and he’s gotten pretty missionary about it. To help others prepare for possible disasters, he published advice to others in *The Scientist* magazine (December 2005):

- Family matters. Possessions don't.
- Planning counts, but so does providence.
- Don't depend on the government, but don't rule out their ability to help.
- Everyone needs an alternate e-mail address and to keep hard copies of up-to-date contact lists.
- Liquid nitrogen dewars are best for emergency storage.
- Back up your files.

### Disaster Planning at CSR

CSR recently developed a new disaster recovery plan that would allow us to continue operations if faced with one of a number of possible disasters. Some of our contingency plans rely on our current telework infrastructure and back-up computer systems. We also have access to out-of-state office space if necessary.

In addition, it’s probably important to stock up on the kind of Pincus optimism that can turn lemons into lemonade. Remember all that mold he was fighting? Now he and other researchers in New Orleans are planning a long-range study of the impact of mold on human health. He is telling potential funding groups that New Orleans, where the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 46 percent of the homes inspected showed mold growth, presents a major opportunity for such a study.

