

## In the Center of the Storm

By Don Lockett

In the early months of 2002, most of us were still in shock from the 9-11 and anthrax attacks. Few knew what might happen next. It is safe to say Dr. Alexander Politis did not quite know what he was getting into when he applied for a new job at the Center for Scientific Review at the National Institutes of Health. He could not have imagined the coming storm when he accepted the job as chief of CSR's [Infectious Diseases and Microbiology Integrated Review Group](#). This group comprises the scientific panels of outside experts that review NIH grant applications related to infectious diseases, except AIDS.



Alex Politis

"I did not realize the number of applications that would come," he says. "We heard that some biodefense applications were coming . . . but I don't think anyone appreciated the numbers that would come at us." Since then, the applications assigned to his group has soared 60 percent—from about 600 to over 1,000 now. "But it's not just biodefense," he adds. "Emerging diseases are a big part of it, too. SARS has generated a lot of applications."

The worst part for Politis was that his group was seriously short staffed when he came onboard. He only had five experienced Scientific Review Administrators and two newly hired SRAs, so he had to hustle to recruit and train seven more SRAs.

Politis credits his success in recruiting new SRAs to having "convinced them that training was a high priority . . . and that we have a good group." While he takes responsibility for training new SRAs, one of the experienced SRA in the group serves as a mentor. Politis adds that every other SRA in the group "is willing and eager to help answer questions."

He makes sure his SRAs "understand the policies and philosophy that anchors them," but then he "lets them do their job." No one in his group, however, works alone. Politis encourages his SRAs to find and share new approaches to getting the job done and to pitch in when others have greater workloads. He keeps an eye on everything, looking to see that new practices do not violate NIH policies and to ensure that no one has to bear more than his or her fair share.



The Infectious Diseases and Microbiology Integrated Review Group

Politis has a personal interest in what happens since he also serves as the SRA for the Microbial Physiology and Genetics 2 Study Section. "I'm a player-coach," he says. He thus encourages his SRAs to tell him if they think he is doing something wrong. "We then figure things out together," he says.

The results have been remarkable for a group faced with so many challenges. Not only has it kept its review schedules, but it has produced its summary statements on time, enabling NIH institutes and centers to fund the most promising applications. The group subsequently received the highest honor bestowed by NIH in June 2003—an NIH Director's Award for their efforts "coordinating expert reviews of a large number of proposals important to the nation."

Politis credits much of this success to team spirit, and his SRAs agree. "Our IRG is great," says Marian Wachtel, SRA of the SSS-K Study Section, which reviews small business grant applications. "I work with a bunch of very smart, dedicated and just good people." She and many of her coworkers eat lunch together almost every day. A big crowd usually gathers for a mini fiesta on Thursdays, when the cafeteria serves taco salads.

Politis' resume shows he was well qualified for the job. He had been the SRA of CSR's Immunological Sciences Study Section. He earned his Ph.D. in cell biology from the University of Maryland studying the mechanisms of cell volume regulation. Politis then studied signal transduction and gene regulation in murine macrophages stimulated with interferons at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences. Before coming to CSR he worked for Human Genome Sciences, Inc., and served as Assistant Editor of the *Journal of Immunology*.



Alex Politis is surrounded by his wife Janet, Samantha (age 9), Carmen (age 6), and Nicholas (age 3).

One experience not listed on his resume, however, probably did much to prepare him for being chief of a fast expanding group: he and his wife have adopted three children. "The red tape was just unbelievable. . . we even had to have HIV tests," he explains, noting that whoever came up this requirement must have failed biology. It took months of research, classes, and interviews. But when it happened, it happened fast. An unexpected call sent them running to the hospital for their first daughter, Samantha. "It was pure adrenalin for about a week," he says. "But we just did it all and it was fine." He and his wife adopted two more children, Carmen and Nicholas.

"The big thing is trying to divvy up and take care of everything," says Politis. Despite the added work and responsibility, he loves the time he spends with his kids. "They're amazing," he continues, pointing to photos around his office. "There's something going on all the time, and I guess you sort of take pride in what happens so far, but there's a long way to go."

It seems he feels the same way about his group at CSR. When an SRA knocks on his door for help, Politis suddenly ends his Staff Story interview to listen to the problem. With more applications this round and an ongoing [reorganization](#), there's a long way to go.