CSR's Andrea Kopstein Has Numbers on Her Mind, People in Her Heart

By Esmeralda Barnes

Numbers may make some people's eyes go glossy and brains approach burn-out, leaving them tongue-tied and confused. Not Dr. Andrea Kopstein, CSR's director of planning, analysis and evaluation. Numbers are her life. "I'm always thinking about numbers," she said.

"I think numerically about most things. I'm always calculating the percent off something is, and figuring out which size I want to buy based on the price per ounce, which a lot of labels in grocery stores feature now. But I figure it out in my head," she said, remembering that she did better in math and science courses where there was a right or wrong answer, as opposed to other disciplines more prone to subjectivity.

What's In Dr. Kopstein's Purview?

Kopstein is heading evaluations of a number of pilots CSR is implementing, and she is involved in a broader NIH endeavor to assess the effectiveness of efforts to enhance peer review.

At CSR, Andrea now is assessing the impact of allowing applicants to correct mistakes in the pre-meeting critique of their applications. The "pre-buttal" is intended to allow applicants to correct factual errors in the reviewer critiques posted prior to review meetings. Reviewers would see the correction in time for the meeting and discussion. This, perhaps, would help applicants avoid the impact of an erroneous assumption (such as a lower review score or being denied funding).

CSR has another review-related pilot that addresses the effectiveness of reviewing applications in the order of preliminary priority score. It up to Kopstein to evaluate how effective is that approach, along with other CSR initiatives, such as Asynchronous Electronic Discussion (AED), a virtual review format .

Kopstein is determining if the expectations or goals for those initiatives are being accomplished and what, if any, issues reviewers or Scientific Review Officers might be noticing when they are using it. AED allows reviewers to post their reviews and comments in a blog format that provides greater flexibility, saving travel time and expense, while making it possible for renowned reviewers across the globe to participate in peer review.

"I've also evaluated the mentoring program for new [Scientific Review Officers] and helped with an evaluation tool for looking at news ways of sending information to reviewers," she said. "I'm doing satisfaction surveys to help point out aspects of peer review enhancement initiatives that can be tweaked in order to improve them."

NIH-Wide Survey of Peer Review

Kopstein's work goes beyond her evaluation of major review initiatives at CSR. She's working on an NIH-wide project with the NIH director's office that will create a baseline data set of opinions about the peer review system from a range of internal and external NIH constituents. This survey will be used for years to come for assessing the effects of NIH's peer review enhancements.

Surveys are important to NIH and the public, offering important insight into how well initiatives are working and identifying areas of public health need. It's Kopstein's job to ensure that the information gathered meets those and other criteria and does not unnecessarily burden the public.

Kopstein is the one to ask about doing a survey of any kind at CSR. She has official clearance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and "is always careful to comply." Government regulations require surveys of more than nine people to obtain OMB clearance in order to protect the general public.

What Andrea Loves About NIH & Her Work

"The people here are smart, they work hard and I feel NIH does important work. When you work here, somehow you are a small part of that important work," Kopstein said. "The review process is intrinsically involved in determining what gets funded…and the breakthroughs that may come later."

She has spent most of her career as a statistician conducting surveys. Before joining CSR in early 2008, she headed the Quality Improvement and Workforce Development Branch of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), within SAMSHA's Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.

"I really enjoy looking at the relationships between things that happen," she said. "For example, at CSR, I look at the relationship between modifications to the peer review and whether it makes this process better for applicants, reviewers, Scientific Review Officers and Program Officers."

But the CSR customer satisfaction surveys (addressing how people like an initiative and how well it works) Andrea does now are different than the ones she conducted earlier in her career. Her previous work involved scientific assessments related to health, substance use and other topics that were the subjects of large national surveys.

Kopstein, a gym enthusiast who runs her life as efficiently as the numbers she crunches, was a survey statistician working on the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, first at the National Institute on Drug Abuse and then SAMSHA. Her early career she spent at the National Center for Health Statistics, part of the Centers for Disease Control, working on multiple national data collection efforts. Kopstein received her Ph.D. in epidemiology from Johns Hopkins and her master's degree in public health from the University of Texas.

Though numbers are a big part of her life, what lives (or dies) behind the numbers is still what motivates her, some thirty years into her career. Looking off into the distance, she remembers

working at a pharmaceutical company that developed adriamycin—one of the first, very successful breast cancer drugs. "It made me feel good to be part of something that mattered, saved lives and made lives better."

And it still does, she quietly said, nodding.