ASBMB STATEMENT ON NIH EFFORTS TO ADDRESS SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN SCIENCE

National Institutes of Health Director Francis S. Collins released a statement yesterday making it clear that the agency does not tolerate sexual harassment. While the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology's Public Affairs Advisory Committee appreciates the sentiments expressed in the statement, NIH policy changes are needed to curb sexual harassment at grantee institutions.

Our primary concern is that Collins' statement does not define how the NIH will respond to violations of sexual harassment policies at institutions where NIH-funded research is performed. The NIH and its grantee institutions must work together to ensure that the biomedical research enterprise promulgates a culture of safety and respect.

The science-funding agency also launched what it called an "anti-sexual harassment" website this week. The website emphasizes that grantee institutions should address sexual harassment internally, according to local, state and federal laws, and requires them to report to the NIH only when the status of senior/key personnel on projects changes.

While institutions that receive NIH funding have a critical role to play in stopping sexual harassment, we are concerned that this limited reporting requirement may perpetuate the underreporting of violations that lead to senior/key personnel changes and discourage institutions from addressing less severe forms of harassment that may precede more severe violations. Beyond reporting the removal or replacement of personnel, the agency also should document other administration actions by institutions and formulate its own responses when appropriate.

The ASBMB PAAC encourages the NIH to develop policies to address sexual harassment of those working on NIH-funded projects and work with other agencies that support extramural research to ensure uniformity in reporting and consequences.