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Lawmakers assail NIH funding for sexual-arousal conference

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The National Institutes of Health continues to fund sex studies despite protests from members of Congress who say projects such as paying women to watch pornography take taxpayer dollars away from potentially lifesaving research.

The critics' latest target of outrage: \$26,000 in federal funds for a conference on sexual arousal next month at the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, Ind.

Discussion topics will "include the relationship ... between sexual motivation and arousal," and development of "guidelines for ... measurement of sexual response," the conference organizer wrote in his grant application.

"If this conference needs funding, they ought to hit up [pornographer] Larry Flynt, not taxpayers," said Rep. Jeff Flake, Arizona Republican.

NIH documents obtained by The Washington Times show that the Bethesda-based federal agency's grant-review panel "unanimously and enthusiastically" endorsed next month's conference where Northwestern University psychology professor J. Michael Bailey will be a featured speaker.

It was a \$147,000 NIH grant for a Bailey project — paying women to view pornography while using an instrument called a plethysmograph to measure their sexual responses — that prompted 20 Republican members of Congress to sign a letter to the agency's director, demanding an explanation for what they called "a bizarre spending decision."

"With the current state of the economy and government deficits, federal funds must be spent responsibly," Mr. Flake and his House colleagues wrote in a March letter to NIH Director Dr. Elias Adam Zerhouni. "We request an explanation of the criteria used for making project funding decisions. Specifically, we wish to know why funding for viewing pornography takes priority over funding for disease research."

Mr. Bailey, whose latest book, "The Man Who Would Be Queen," examines homosexuality and other aspects of sexual identity, is scheduled to participate in a panel about "Gender, Age & Sexual Orientation" on July 15, the final day of the four-day conference.

The conference is funded through the NIH's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

"While the NIH can find money to pay women to watch pornography and fund a conference to tell everyone the obvious, funding for autism, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's research continues to lag," said Rep. Dave Weldon, Florida Republican, who is also a physician. "Clearly, the NIH grant-review process is broken, and I'm going to work to fix it."

NIH grant applications go through several levels of review.

According to NIH officials, those who reviewed the proposal for next month's conference

"unanimously and enthusiastically agreed that this is an opportune time to bring together the leaders in sexual psychophysiology for the first major conference on this topic, and that there is a significant need for NIH support of scientific advancements in this field rather than reliance on private-sector funding."

A spokesman for NICHD noted that its Web site, describing the institute's research mission, includes the statement: "Learning about the reproductive health of men and women and educating people about reproductive practices is important to both individuals and societies."

Christine Bachrach, chief of the NICHD's Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch, defended the grant for the Kinsey Institute conference.

"The purpose of the conference is to assess current scientific knowledge of behavioral, psychological and biological factors relevant to sexual dysfunction and sexual behavior — including behaviors that spread sexually transmitted diseases," she said. "This information is important for developing treatments for sexual dysfunction and for preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases."

Such explanations do not appease congressional critics.

"The federal government is pretty efficient at wasting money, but this may be a new low," Mr. Flake said. "Talk about being out of touch. How do you think the average taxpayer is going to feel about having \$26,000 of their money spent on a conference to study sexual arousal?"