

Audit asks review panel for Island research unit

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ALBANY — A 13-page audit published today by state Comptroller Edward V. Regan concludes that a professional review committee to screen research projects done at the Institute for Basic Research, Willowbrook, needs to be established, and a center for scientific study of mental retardation failed to have proper consent forms from people who took part in two research projects done there.

The institute, founded in 1967, has overcome problems of "underutilization" and "lack of direction" that were exposed in a 1976 probe by the same office, according to the audit.

But financial and operating faults remained through the period of audit, which ended last July, its authors said.

For example, the institution has 26 full-time employees doing laboratory tests for the institute and other state agencies.

Yet, when medical lab tests were performed for patients at South Beach Psychiatric Center and inmates at Arthur Kill Correctional Facility, they were contracted out for \$140,000.

Officials of those two state facilities on the Island told the auditors they did not know the institute could do the work instead, with little or no extra overhead cost, according to the report.

The situation was changed and the lab work now is assigned to the institute, it said.

Among other criticism, orders for certain goods were "split" to avoid competitive bidding, and scientific equipment inventory was poorly kept.

Also, "the institute buys various research supplies and services, such as animal foods, lab mice and radioactive waste disposal, without competitive bidding," it said.

Institute officials say in written responses attached to the report that the problems disclosed have been or are in the process of being corrected.

Last year, the state provided \$7.9 million to operate the institute.

Other highlights of the audit:

- The institute did not set up a committee to "evaluate each research proposal on its professional merits and ethics," according to the comptroller.

Such a panel, required by Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities rules, was, however, to be formed by Jan. 31, according to responses from the institute included with the 13-page audit report.

- An internal review body called the Human Research Committee, "which reviews projects involving humans to safeguard their rights and welfare, has not been following up to see whether approved project consent forms are used."

"In two of six projects looked at by auditors, the approved consent forms were not being used," Regan said.

- One involved urine samples

from two pregnant women at St. Vincent's Medical Center for research on "alcohol-related birth defects" and "early detection fetal alcohol syndrome."

The other had to do with an immunity research project, in which a consent form was approved and later changed to reflect a \$5 charge for a blood sample.

"Although this was not a serious alteration," the audit said, the human research committee "stated that the approved form should not be altered."

Prior to 1976, "the institute had been working without a full-time director for three years, about 20 percent of the facility was vacant and only \$100,000 in outside funding such as federal grants had been obtained."

As of a year ago, the center has a full-time administrator, "has become fully utilized," and boosted its "outside support," meaning grant money, to \$1.7 million.

Scientific discoveries that could aid the mentally retarded and disabled have been announced out of the institute, which is located on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook.

Some legislators in recent years have advised against keeping the program when direct human needs were pressing, such as homelessness.

On equipment controls, about 300 items lacked tag numbers and 3 items originally costing \$150,000 were stored in the basement, according to the report.