

Report on Research Compliance Volume 15, Number 6. June 30, 2018 ORI Picks Up Speed With Six Misconduct Findings, Half Involving Cancer Research

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With six misconduct findings in five months, the HHS Office of Research Integrity (ORI) seems to have recovered momentum since its embattled director, Kathy Partin, was transferred to the federal Uniformed Services University in December. At the time, the job shift was described as a three-month, temporary detail from ORI, but Partin has not returned.

ORI is tasked with making findings of research misconduct, defined as fabrication, falsification and plagiarism, when it is found in studies supported by NIH and other Public Health Service (PHS) agencies. It also has an educational arm that seeks to help prevent misconduct.

This year's cases represent several firsts and contain other notable features. ORI imposed a second penalty on an investigator sanctioned the year before, a situation that has never occurred previously. Four of the six cases involved women. One investigator was an NIH fellow. Two hailed from New York, while others were from universities in Texas, North Carolina and Alabama. The sanctions were equally divided between the two primary types: debarments and supervisory plans. Three of the six involved cancer research.

In 2016 and 2017, ORI issued seven misconduct findings in each year, a low not seen in the previous 16 years and less than half the typical number in preceding years, including in 2015. ORI issued no findings from August 2016 to June 2017 (*RRC 6/17, p. 1*).

The arrival of Partin in December 2015 was initially greeted with hope that ORI would see some stability at the top that it had lacked for six years (*RRC 1/16, p. 1*). The position had been vacant for nearly two years before Partin began, following the resignation in 2014 of former director David Wright, himself in the job for only two years (*RRC 4/14, p. 1*).

Throughout that turmoil, ORI continued to make findings and offer educational events and activities, anchored by John Dahlberg and Susan Garfinkel, the deputy director and director of the Division of Investigative Oversight, respectively, and a stable of investigators and other staff. They were joined in 2014 by Zoë Hammatt as the head of the Division of Education and Integrity, after a protracted hiring process common to the federal government that seems particularly elongated at ORI. Dahlberg retired before Partin began.

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