Good news, bad news about AIDS research

WASHINGTON (NEA) — There has been good news and bad news lately about the U.S. government’s anti-AIDS research.

On the positive side, significant advances have been announced in two separate projects. On the negative side, a panel of outside experts has confirmed many of the allegations about problems in the top AIDS research lab.

For the past six months charges and denials have been flying about alleged mismanagement of the AIDS research program at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. Officials there have admitted that more than half of their top-level scientists at the lab quit in recent months.

Some charged their experiments had been tampered with by jealous colleagues. Others claim that publication of their research papers has been blocked by administrators.

Robert Wagman

Now a distinguished three-member panel of the National Academy of Sciences has completed an investigation of the CDC research program. CDC officials are hailing the report, saying it clears them of mismanagement.

But a careful reading of the report — mindful of the fact that it was undoubtedly written to cast the program in the best light possible — shows that many of the allegations have a basis in fact.

The review panel, headed by Julius Krevans, chancellor of the University of California, found that the CDC research effort suffered from rapid supervisory turnover and low staff morale. He also found evidence that sabotage by squabbling researchers did occur in “minor experiments.”

The investigators found that “doubts raised about AIDS program laboratory activities can be traced to the lack of strong scientific leadership and clear research goals and the consequent research morale.” One direct result of the poor leadership was that “demands and pressures ... generated internal competition rather than uniting individuals.”

The panel also investigated charges that important findings had been suppressed, specifically the discovery that commercially available spermicides might be effective in killing the AIDS virus.

An environment of distrust and dislike” among some researchers. But, trying to protect the integrity of the research advances that have come out of the CDC program, the panel concluded “in no case was experimental work seriously disrupted ... or compromised.”

They concluded the research was not suppressed: The results were published in a British medical journal. But they were hard pressed to explain why it had taken more than 11 months for CDC administrators to clear the research for publication.

AIDS, in its advanced stages, attacks brain cells. Victims may suffer memory loss, dementia and severe depression.