

Report of NINDS Risk Evaluation Project
June, 2002

The following is a brief report of the project entitled “NINDS Risk Evaluation” which began in June 2001 and was completed in March, 2002.

This project involved working with a consultant to establish a risk-management approach for the Institute that would avoid duplicating existing work and focus attention on those risk areas that might otherwise be left unattended. NINDS had identified the need to develop a risk-control approach that was more formalized and integrated, without becoming overwhelming or unnecessarily consumptive of resources and managerial attention. The planned evaluation encompassed a broad look at risk across all areas/programs of the Institute’s operations (Intramural, Extramural, etc.).

NINDS identified a consultant from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University to assist in this process. Dr. Malcolm Sparrow, an expert in the field of risk management, worked with us to develop a framework for risk-control. Prior to developing a model for our use, Dr. Sparrow conducted several months of research, including bibliographic research on risk-control theory and practice in the spectrum of public, not-for-profit and private institutions; and a compilation of risk-control frameworks and methodologies, risk categorization systems, risk assessment, definition, prioritization and containment protocols.

The risk-management approach the Institute developed sought to minimize, as far as reasonably possible, the degree to which adverse events—especially those that are unpredictable, uncertain, improbably, or unanticipated—could damage the Institute’s ability to pursue out central mission and vision.

Based on this research, Dr. Sparrow developed a framework for our internal use. This framework consists of a risk management group structure: Risk Management Group (executive level), Crisis Response Team, and Risk Teams (initially focused on seven risk categories); a risk profile format to follow in identifying the risks, determining the nature and seriousness of the exposure, the organizational context for control, and potential actions aimed at further mitigation of the risk; and a risk management reporting structure.

NINDS staffs are now in the process of actively working on three of the risk areas identified through this model. The Risk Management Group meets on a bi-monthly basis to review progress of the active projects, assess the current status of issues affecting the Institute, and making determinations for future projects.

By adopting a more formal risk-management structure, NINDS is better able to deal with the risks that are invisible or uncertain, unrepresented or under-represented in their normal process flows, awkward in shape and size or shared (where cooperation with other groups is a pre-requisite for effective intervention).