

Texas cancer agency's top scientific officer to resign over funding system

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The top scientific officer for the state's cancer-fighting agency is stepping down, citing concerns over how Texas is distributing millions of dollars in public money for cancer research.

Dr. Alfred Gilman, a Nobel Prize-winner and former dean of UT Southwestern Medical School, has served as chief scientific officer for the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas since 2009. He said his resignation would be effective Oct. 12.

Texasans voted to establish the agency, known as CPRIT, in 2007. It's authorized to spend up to \$300 million a year on cancer research and prevention and on efforts to bring new diagnostics and treatments to market. So far, \$670 million in state money has been awarded.

Gilman did not respond to requests for an interview. But in his resignation letter, dated Tuesday, he criticized the agency's focus on expanding "commercialization activities" over "research activities" and specifically its review of a type of grant known as an "incubator" award. Incubator grants are aimed at connecting scientists and business experts in hopes of bringing new technologies and therapies to market.

The agency's sole incubator grant, awarded in March, was \$20 million for a joint project between Rice University and University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

Gilman said that the application for the grant — the largest commercialization grant awarded by the agency — was sent in only days before it was awarded.

"Why was CPRIT's biggest ever multi-million dollar grant (for just one year) given to MD Anderson for a proposal submitted on March 11, 2012 that was a brief (6.5 page) non-scientific description of a plan to conduct early-stage, preclinical drug discovery? Drug discovery is research," Gilman said in an email late Thursday to The Dallas Morning News.

In his resignation letter, Gilman said: "We have launched strong programs because funding decisions have been based on high-level competitions, where judges have been some of the best cancer researchers and physicians in the country — free of conflicts of interest and all coming from outside of Texas. Research activities that are yielding exciting results should be continued, and new applications should continue to be received."

But Gilman said "the desire to fund competitive renewals and expand commercialization activities" could make it impossible to launch new research initiatives.

In his letter to William Gimson, CPRIT's executive director, Gilman warned against abandoning the out-of-state peer review system used for research grant requests. Keeping that system intact, he said, is the agency's most "critical concern."

"Your ability to do so will be critically dependent on the attitudes of CPRIT leadership, especially including the oversight committee," Gilman wrote.

Gimson said that he was comfortable with how the incubator grant was awarded and that there were no plans to stop using out-of-state reviewers. "I would just chalk this up to a difference of opinion," he said.

In a statement released Thursday, leaders of CPRIT's oversight committee said they "trust the gold standard peer review process that CPRIT has established for research, prevention and commercialization portfolios." They said Gilman had played an "integral role" in the agency's early success.

Committee members are appointed by the governor, lieutenant governor and speaker of the Texas House. The state's attorney general and comptroller or their designees are permanent members.

Gilman expressed particular concern about the review process on the incubator grant awarded jointly to Rice and M.D. Anderson. The cancer center and UTSW are the two largest institutional recipients of CPRIT funding. In his email to The News, he also asked why seven collaborative research applications were not brought to the oversight committee for consideration in March.

Gilman chose the effective date of his resignation, he said, so that he could attend a series of meetings, including one in July of CPRIT's oversight committee.

"I will be there to hope that the rules governing review and funding of incubators have been revised to prevent further award of vast funds for research programs ostensibly within incubators that were not described and therefore could not have been reviewed," Gilman said in his letter.

Gilman, 70, also said he wanted to stay in his post long enough to attend an Oct. 5 meeting of the agency's Scientific Review Council to ensure that scientists submitting their research proposals "will still encounter a functional peer review system."

Raymond N. DuBois, provost and executive vice president of the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, said Rice and M.D. Anderson followed CPRIT's guidelines in submitting their application. Their joint venture focuses on cultivating startup life science businesses that develop anti-cancer drugs and technologies.

The incubator grant program is "focused on a business plan" so that research can be converted into commercial ventures in Texas, DuBois said. "It sounds like Dr. Gilman is not completely happy with the review process," he said, "but obviously that was something that was set up by CPRIT."

When CPRIT sought applicants for incubator funding last year, it released a 17-page guide saying the goal was to "create, sustain, or expand programs within for-profit companies or nonprofit institutions focused on the discovery or development of innovative oncology medicines."

CPRIT said applicants would be required to submit a detailed business plan for review by the agency's Commercialization Review Council for "commercial viability" and collaborations with "leading institutions of medical education, centers for clinical research, and leading national business schools." The council is made up of Texas businessmen and oversees out-of-state commercial reviewers.

Applications would be reviewed on several levels, including the management team, how the incubator would evaluate potential business deals, how it would measure productivity, and its marketing plans, according to the CPRIT document.

Gimson said that the incubator grants were never intended to be reviewed by scientists and that he would make sure "that when we do bring incubators forward in the future there's no question about them whatsoever."

In a letter posted on CPRIT's website, Gimson also praised Gilman's leadership and noted that he had implemented a "conflict-free system that is the cornerstone of our cancer research award process."