Experimental subjects advised

By Farrell Peternal

An effort is now underway to inform MIT students of available advice on the solicitation of human as experimental subjects by non-MIT investigative groups.

A recent letter from the Office for Student Affairs and the MIT Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES) was sent to all living groups. In it COUHES Chairman Dr. Warren Point, along with Dean Carol Eisenberg and Medical Director Dr. Allen O. Soter, asked that all students approached by non-MIT investigators testing drugs, food products, etc., check with COUHES before consenting to become subjects.

Point was quick to point out to The Tech that this is not an attempt to put such investigations in a bad light or implicate that there is a large rise in such solicitations, but the letter was only meant to educate the students.

Point heads COUHES, a President's committee of approximately fifteen members that reviews all major MIT experiments that involve humans as subjects. It consists of two undergraduates and two graduate students, three medical doctors, as assistant dean and a host of representatives from departments such as Biology, Nutrition and Food Sciences, Psychology, Political Science, and others.

MIT was one of the first educational or research institutions in the country to set up review protocols of such experiments. By law all experiments funded by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and by policy, all projects financed by the National Institutes of Health must be reviewed by a committee such as COUHES.

Point estimates that the committee has reviewed over 450 experiment applications in the last six to seven years and that the rate is growing. "Not many universities do as large a volume in human experimentation as does MIT," he said, noting that the school may receive as much as seven to eight million dollars per year in federal funds. "There have not been any really important instances of harm that we know of," Point stated, but it is the type of work that his committee need not review. Questionnaire-type of experiments that call for human responses usually would fall under the scope of COUHES, but are harmless.

Point said the applications reviewed by COUHES generally fulfill two requirements: the experiment is not directly for the benefit of the subject, and risk may be involved. Where there is a possibility of harm, he stated, the experiment's value to society or to the subject's class must be weighed carefully.

"If there have not been any really important instances of harm that we know of," Point declared, emphasizing that there is less chance of experimental harm at universities than in hospitals or large research centers.

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