

Incoming director(CAN) seeks to get centre for alternative medicine back on track

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Josephine Briggs, director, US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland

Incoming director seeks to get centre for alternative medicine back on track.

Since its creation in 1998, the US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) has fallen on tough times. It has struggled for ever–tightening funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), been criticized for a lack of scientific rigour, and suffered the untimely death of its first director, Stephen Straus. Staff hope that a new director will help revive its fortunes. See CV

"Josephine Briggs will gain the staff's confidence and return stability as well as the excitement and enthusiasm needed for the centre to grow," says Ruth Kirschstein, former deputy director of the NIH and acting director of the NCCAM.

Briggs may seem an odd choice to lead the NCCAM, which oversees the development of alternative treatments. She has worked in traditional medicine since receiving her medical degree from Harvard in 1970. In fact, she specialized in renal physiology in order to work in a straightforward, quantitative field. But later career developments would pique her interest in less conventional research fare.

As a chief resident at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, Briggs realized that she wanted more research training to pursue an academic career. She did a postdoc at Yale School of Medicine, working with the early leaders in evidence–based medicine, and spent six years as a research scientist at the University of Munich in Germany. Later, in the University of Michigan's nephrology division, she developed her clinical skills. She and husband Jurgen Schnermann studied the renal hormone system that helps regulate blood pressure.

She was soon made director of the kidney, urological and

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haematological diseases division of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). While overseeing clinical trials, she noticed large placebo effects and wanted to explore them further. She had started organizing a conference on placebo effects when she discovered that NCCAM director Straus was doing the same; together, they published the conference proceedings and Briggs began to explore mind–body medicine.

She now wants to develop novel clinical–trial designs -- able to detect even subtle effects -- to test alternative treatments. "Many people are using these therapies, often in large amounts, and the NIH needs to do a good job of researching them," Briggs says. Kirschstein expects Briggs's background will help her better integrate complementary therapies into conventional medicine.

### CV

2006–08: Senior scientific officer, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Chevy Chase, Maryland

1997–2006: Director, Division of Kidney, Urologic and Hematologic Diseases, NIDDK, Bethesda, Maryland

1993–97: Professor, Departments of Internal Medicine and Physiology, University of Michigan

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