

**On Internet Access to Astronaut Biomedical Data:
Letter Report**

Committee on Space Biology and Medicine, National
Research Council

ISBN: 0-309-12245-7, 1 pages, 8 1/2 x 11, (1996)

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On Internet Access to Astronaut Biomedical Data

In response to a discussion by teleconference between Dr. Arnauld Nicogossian, Acting Associate Administrator for NASA Life and Microgravity Sciences and Applications, and members of the Space Studies Board at its meeting on June 12-14, 1996, Board Chair Claude R. Canizares and Committee on Space Biology and Medicine Chair Mary Jane Osborn sent the following letter to Dr. Nicogossian.

At the Space Studies Board's meeting on June 12-14, 1996, at the Ames Research Center, it was brought to our attention that NASA is making plans to post on the Internet for public access biomedical data obtained from space shuttle crew members during flight. While sensitive to NASA's worthy goal of making flight data accessible to qualified researchers, the Board questions the general usefulness of making this information public. In addition, the Board is concerned about privacy considerations related to the ethics of handling of data obtained from experiments on human subjects. Because of the small size of shuttle crews, merely withholding the names of individual subjects will not preserve anonymity. The Board is also concerned that, even if permission for such public release is sought from the individuals involved, a practice of posting biomedical data publicly may discourage voluntary participation by astronauts as subjects in future experimental protocols.

In your letter of June 28, 1996, you recognized many of these concerns and noted that you have asked Dr. Baruch Brody, chair of the NASA Bioethics Task Force, and Dr. Lawrence Dietlein, chair of the Johnson Space Center Institutional Review Board, to review them. Note that the Institute of Medicine has recently issued guidelines in the related area of handling of patient data (*Health Data in the Information Age: Use, Disclosure, and Privacy*, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1994). We will be very interested to hear the conclusions of the reviews that you have requested from your Bioethics Task Force and Institutional Review Board. Our Committee on Space Biology and Medicine next meets on September 26 and 27, 1996. We would like to suggest that the results of the reviews be briefed to the Committee for discussion at this meeting and that NASA suspend action on public Internet posting of the astronaut data until this discussion can take place.

Last update 2/10/00 at 12:12 pm