

# Frustration at FDA makes staff ripe for picking by drug firms

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When pharmaceutical consulting firm Quintiles wants to hire an employee, the first place it looks is the Food and Drug Administration.

These former insiders bring critical expertise to the consultant and clients like Merck & Co. Inc. and Pfizer Inc., but there is also an unintended downside.

As companies siphon off the FDA's most experienced scientists, they leave an increasingly lean, less-confident staff that is hesitant to put new drugs on the market, analysts say.

FDA's staffing pains - exacerbated by the departure of Baby Boomers and increasing competition for science graduates - have caught the attention of lawmakers and consumers, who blame declining inspections for a string of problems with tainted food and drugs.

Over the past two years, Congress has berated the agency on salmonella-infected peanut butter, poisonous pet food and most recently, the contaminated blood thinner heparin, which has been associated with dozens of deaths.

"What you have now is a big sucking sound of these staffers leaving FDA and going into the more lucrative side of the business or packing it in and retiring entirely," said Steve Brozak, an analyst with WBB Securities. "This cannot have any positive effect whatsoever."

FDA's leadership is scrambling to recruit a new generation of food and drug regulators, as the average age of FDA's 10,100-person workforce reaches 54. Thirty percent of the agency's regular staff is already eligible to retire, and FDA expects to hire 600 staffers by October to replace those leaving.

FDA's outside advisers say frustration with FDA culture is a major reason its turnover rate is twice that of other agencies.

Staffers who disagree with management are reportedly discouraged from speaking up, according to an Institutes of Medicine report on FDA's drug safety system.

Staffers say strict deadlines for the review of drugs also contribute to stress.

The image of an overburdened agency has not made things easier for FDA recruiters, who crisscross the country seeking applicants with science backgrounds.

While FDA records list 3,249 foreign drug manufacturers subject to inspections, the agency can't tell whether it has inspected two-thirds of them, according to Government Accountability Office investigators.

The agency may soon get an injection of much-needed funds.

After weathering nearly weekly scoldings from lawmakers, FDA Commissioner Andrew von Eschenbach asked Congress last month for an emergency \$275 million to supplement this year's \$2.3 billion fiscal budget.

The Senate subcommittee that oversees FDA's budget passed a bill to deliver the additional funding.