

Cancer body 'must do more for minorities'

[WASHINGTON] The US National Cancer Institute (NCI) is falling short on work with ethnic minorities and the poor, according to a report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM). The report claims that the NCI devoted only 1 per cent of its \$2.4 billion budget on strategic planning, data collection and spending on research in this area in 1997 — although the NCI disputes this figure.

The higher incidence and death rate of some cancers among ethnic minorities and the poor require more action by the NCI and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), according to the report, released last week. It was requested in 1997 by the Senate appropriations subcommittee that funds the NIH.

"It is critical that we learn why some ethnic minorities and the medically underserved are more prone to cancer and less likely to survive it," says Alfred Haynes, chair of the committee that wrote the report, and former president and dean of the Drew Postgraduate Medical School in Los Angeles.

But some of its conclusions were challenged by NCI officials. Director Richard Klausner said that, far from lacking a strategic plan for minority research, the NCI has "a very active, dynamic and visionary planning process" that includes minority concerns.

The report notes that the rate of prostate cancer is 15 per cent higher in African American white men. African American women who develop breast cancer are more likely to die from it than white women. Asian Americans get stomach and liver cancer at higher rates than whites, and cervical cancer is highest in Hispanic and Vietnamese American



Black death: a man at last September's cancer march in Washington pleads for more research.

women. Poor whites, it adds, face similar problems; for instance, rates of lung cancer are higher in Appalachia than elsewhere.

"No blueprint or strategic plan to direct or coordinate this research activity appears to exist" at NCI, the committee writes, and funding for minority research is "inadequate". It says the NCI's system for monitoring cancer incidence, mortality and survival in different populations misses key minority groups.

The NIH and NCI should be more active in shaping minority cancer research, the report argues, as institutes leave "critical gaps" unfilled. They tolerate a research priority-setting process that "fails to serve the needs" of ethnic minority and poor groups.

Recruitment of research subjects is a problem, too, it says. For example, in one large study that showed that the drug tamox-

ifen prevented breast cancer in high-risk women, only 2 per cent of the participants were African American.

But the authors commended the NCI for having acted on several recommendations. And NCI officials, testifying before the senate subcommittee last Thursday (21 January), said they agreed with some of its suggestions. These included the need to classify groups for epidemiological purposes by ethnicity and not race, allowing for the role of factors like culture and behaviour in cancer incidence and mortality.

But Klausner disputed the finding that the institute spent just \$24 million on research among minorities in 1997 out of a budget of \$2.39 billion. He put the figure at \$124 million. The discrepancy arises because the study included only research specifically designed to address cancer in minorities. The NCI also includes general studies involving minority participants where questions are asked that are relevant to them.

More generally, Klausner rejected the notion of segregating minority research. For the NCI to pursue minority research only through projects pertaining specifically to minorities would be impractical, inefficient and counterproductive, he said.

"We want to be sure that minorities and the underserved are fairly treated," said subcommittee chair Arlen Specter (Republican, Pennsylvania). "It may be that [money] could be directed more specifically to those groups." Specter said he might include in this year's NIH spending bill "specific standards as to what needs to be done".

Meredith Wadman

German/Swedish venture creates plant biotechnology giant

[MUNICH] The German pharmaceutical and chemical company BASF last week announced a major research collaboration with the Swedish seed-breeding company Svalöf Weibull (SW). BASF and SW will merge their research activities in an attempt to become one of the world's leading plant biotechnology companies.

A mutual company, BASF Plant Sciences, will be set up in Ludwigshafen, near the BASF headquarters. Its research budget will be DM100 million (US\$59 million) a year, jointly financed by BASF and SW.

BASF Plant Sciences will set research goals in plant biotechnology and coordinate internal research by the two companies, distribute research tasks among existing joint ventures, and commission external research, for example at universities.

BASF believes plant biotechnology is one of the most promising areas of commerce, and will pour DM500 million into research over the next three years, 20 per cent of the

company's life-science research budget.

Two joint ventures were founded last summer: the Berlin-based Metanomics, and SunGene at Gatersleben in the German state of Sachsen-Anhalt. They will each eventually employ 50 scientists and technicians.

Metanomics is linked to the Max Planck Institute for Molecular Plant Physiology in Potsdam, of which one of Metanomics' partners, Lothar Willmitzer, is a director. Its research will focus on understanding which plant genes are responsible for biological functions such as growth and response to environmental stress.

SunGene, founded jointly by BASF and the Institute for Plant Genetics and Cultivated Plants Research in Gatersleben, is to develop techniques for adding genes to a cultivated plant's genome.

BASF Plant Sciences is intended to act as a 'technology platform' for the two companies, as well as for SW's existing research and development facilities in plant

biotechnology. SW will bring the interests of its four research units into the firm: DNA LandMarks, based in Quebec, the Swedish companies Amylogene and Lipogene, and the Swedish-based Nilsson-Ehle Laboratory.

Plant geneticists at the University of Freiburg are already profiting from a DM30 million collaboration with BASF, which pays for the salaries and equipment of 40 scientists and technicians. The group is headed by Ralf Reski, a botanist who found that single genes of the moss *Physcomitrella patens* can be knocked out by homologous recombination.

Reski hopes the moss will become a model organism for basic research, similar to the flowering plant *Arabidopsis thaliana*, but with a far lower recombination efficiency. Last spring Reski convinced BASF of his work's potential, the commercial aspects of which are to be investigated further by companies such as Metanomics and SunGene.

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