

Congress supports breast cancer research by taking \$210 million from military

Washington. Last week the US Congress took \$210 million from this year's defence budget and told the government to spend it on breast cancer research. This is the first time that legislators have succeeded in tapping the military budget to pay for a civilian research programme and may represent a down payment on the long-awaited 'peace dividend' following the end of the Cold War. However, it also continues a congressional tradition of designating money for studies on a specific disease, a practice known as 'earmarking' that many believe is a poor way to spend scarce research dollars.

The amendment to a defence spending bill, introduced by Senator Tom Harkin (Democrat, Iowa), removes \$210 million from general defence accounts and gives the money to the US Army for breast cancer research. But the bill also commands the military to enlist the help of other government agencies; in practice, that means the National Cancer Institute (NCI). NCI stewardship "certainly would provide the most efficient mechanism" for spending the money wisely, says Peter Reinecke, a staff member to Harkin.

The 'wall' surrounding defence funds has survived several assaults since it was created by a 1990 agreement on federal spending that established limits on spending for military and civilian programmes.

So why did research on breast cancer, rather than, say, AIDS or Alzheimer's disease, finally make a breach in the wall? One reason is that many male legislators face female opponents in next month's election and want to demonstrate their concern for women's problems. Legislators are especially eager to restore images tarnished by the 1991 Senate confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, accused by a former employee of sexual harassment.

Despite the congressional support for research (the amendment passed the Senate by a 89:4 margin), it is not clear how the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) will react. Early last week, OMB said that the research money would be counted as domestic rather than military spending, meaning that a small slice must be taken out of the civilian budgets of each federal agency, including NCI's parent organization, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), with the total equal to the money added for breast cancer research.

Although the final appropriations bill attempts to avoid that step by explicitly defining the research money as a military expenditure, OMB may still decide to cut domestic programmes across the board. But even if a reduction were to be applied throughout the \$9-billion NIH budget, it

would add up to much less than the \$210 million that NCI will gain.

The amendment from Harkin, who has lost two sisters to breast cancer, does not specify how the money should be spent, but NCI already has plenty of ideas. Samuel Broder, the director of NCI, says that his preference would be for peer-reviewed, investigator-initiated basic research. NCI's budget request for the 1994 fiscal year (beginning on 1 October 1993), now under review at OMB, includes such ambitious projects as the development of new cancer therapies and clinical trials of preventative drugs, as well as studies of the link between diet and breast cancer. NCI also wants to establish more of its Specialized Programs of Research Excellence, centres for both basic and clinical research into breast cancer.

In testimony last month before a task force of the Budget Committee in the House of Representatives, Bernadine Healy, the director of NIH, complained about Congress's habit of telling NIH to spend a certain portion of its budget on a specific disease. "We would hope advice would be accompanied by a cheque," Healy said. Now that she has gotten her wish, the NIH director must decide whether cheques accompanied by congressional advice are really a good way to increase the NIH budget.

Traci Watson

Doubts grow faster than budget in new Framework plan

Munich. The European Communities (EC) are sticking to their aim of nearly doubling research spending by 1998 despite dwindling support by member states. In announcing the EC's next five-year ECU14.7 billion (US\$11 billion) budget proposals for research and development — known as the 'Fourth Framework' — research minister Filippo Pandolfi said last week that it was in line with the EC's overall objective of increasing industrial competitiveness by strengthening Europe's science and research base.

Although details are not yet available, Pandolfi says that he wants to spend ECU1 billion to continue training and promoting the mobility of research workers within Europe. He allocates ECU11.6 billion to 'tightly focused programmes of industrial and social importance' to individual countries but more appropriately carried out at a European level. The new plan emphasizes generic technologies with broad industrial applications and multidisciplinary academic research. More environmental and other socially orientated research will be sup-

ported, and a new programme will allow for collaborative research with non-EC countries in Central and Eastern Europe and in the developing world.

However, it is likely that Europe's Council of Ministers, meeting in Britain in December, will ask Pandolfi to trim his request. Research is one of the most vulnerable parts of the overall EC budget for 1993–97, designed by EC president Jacques Delors, and many countries say they cannot afford to do more of it. Delors hoped to increase research spending from 3.7 per cent of public expenditure to 5 per cent by 1998, narrowing the gap in investment between Europe and its chief economic competitors, the United States and Japan.

The fate of the Maastricht Treaty will not influence the size or characteristics of the Fourth Framework, but its adoption may make it harder for member nations to approve particular projects. Under the Single European Act, Framework programmes must be approved unanimously by the Council of Ministers in a four-stage procedure; specific research projects within the framework

must be approved by a qualified majority, again according to a four-stage procedure. Although the Council of Ministers does not need a formal agreement from the European parliament, the two bodies must consult one another. This can lead to ambiguities — for example, disagreements not always directly related to the projects themselves delayed funding of the third Framework for two and a half years.

The Maastricht Treaty would set up even more hurdles. The procedure of 'codecision' — established in the interests of ensuring greater democracy — means that any decision taken by the ministers must be supported by a more powerful European parliament, whose agreement will carry equal weight legally. This process is bound to move slowly. In addition, the Council of Ministers would have to approve each project unanimously; in theory, a single country could block any project. The European Commission, which is responsible for the EC's directives, estimates that it could take three years to make decisions on individual projects once the treaty is ratified. **Alison Abbott**