

# Future of AIDS research office threatened

**Washington.** A US congressional subcommittee has voted to eliminate the research-funding responsibilities of the National Institutes of Health (NIH)'s fledgling Office of AIDS Research (OAR). The move calls into question the future of the two-year-old office, which is responsible for co-ordinating research on AIDS.

At the same time, the committee has also recommended a 5.7 per cent increase in funding for research at NIH as a whole, including an 11 per cent increase for human genome research. But some researchers fear that the Republican-dominated Congress is seeking to cut funding for AIDS research,

while the overall budget package — which would also abolish the post of Surgeon General — is being opposed by the Clinton administration because of its cuts in social and education programmes.

The AIDS office was set up by Congress in 1993 after researchers and activists had convinced lawmakers of the need for better coordination of AIDS research. Last week's move, taken by an appropriations subcommittee in the House of Representatives, would remove funds for AIDS from William Paul, the director of OAR, and return them to the general funding stream at NIH.

"The bill removes numerous earmarks

and instructions that placed political considerations ahead of scientific decisions," said the subcommittee chairman, John Edward Porter (Republican, Illinois), as he opened the vote on the massive spending bill for the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services.

After discussing the issue with Arnold Levine of Princeton University, the head of OAR's evaluation team, Nancy Pelosi (Democrat, California), put forward an amendment to restore OAR's budget responsibilities. But it failed to win the necessary support of the subcommittee.

"If we start setting political priorities, there is no way to know where the money will go," said Robert Livingston, chair of the full appropriations committee, who attended the vote and expressed concern about attempts to single out AIDS research for special treatment.

"Heart, lung and blood diseases account for half of the deaths in this country, yet they receive only 7.2 per cent of NIH's budget," said Livingston. "We spend \$295 per patient on cancer research, \$158 per patient on multiple sclerosis, \$93 on heart disease, \$54 on Alzheimer's, \$26 on Parkinson's — and \$36,000 per AIDS patient on research."

Under the subcommittee's bill, the NIH would receive an increase of \$642 million over its 1995 budget. This is a significant contrast to the \$9.3 billion in cuts and terminations that the bill would impose on social service programmes, including the elimination of 163 job training initiatives and 50 education programmes.

The National Cancer Institute would receive an increase of \$114 million, 5.3 per cent over 1995 levels, and the National Centre for Human Genome Research an extra \$17 million, to \$170 million.

The proposed budget increase for the NIH may be short-lived. The White House has made it clear that President Bill Clinton will not sign the bill unless at least some of the terminated programmes are reinstated.

But lobby groups keen to see the NIH budget increase, ranging from those representing patients' groups to pharmaceutical companies, are likely to put pressure on Clinton to sign. "You either take the money out of other programmes, or you take it out of NIH," says Dave Moore, of the Ad Hoc Group for Medical Research Funding, concerned that pressure to restore social programmes may mean a raid on NIH funding.

The level of AIDS research funding is not specified in the subcommittee bill. Both Porter and Livingston say this does not necessarily imply that AIDS research will be cut. But AIDS researchers believe otherwise, and have already drafted a letter of protest to Livingston.

The argument that removing the funding authority of OAR will not have any ▶

## Lawyers 'built tobacco smokescreen'

**San Francisco.** Last week, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced its conclusion that nicotine is a drug — and can therefore be legitimately regulated as such. The announcement coincided with the publication of an analysis of tobacco industry documents revealing that industry lawyers have controlled the direction and reporting of both internal and external scientific projects in order to keep knowledge of tobacco's deleterious effects hidden.

The analysis is based on confidential internal documents from Brown & Williamson Co. and British-American Tobacco Co., and was carried out by researchers at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), which had received them from an anonymous source.

The researchers concluded that the lawyers promoted certain research, steered the company away from other work and influenced the ways in which studies were reported, and that their goal was to influence government policy-makers, convince the public that smoking is safe, and develop ammunition for liability suits.

The documents, which UCSF fought to keep in the public domain, were reviewed in detail by UCSF researchers in the 19 July issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. More than half are directly available on the Internet.

Brown & Williamson called the articles "a cherry-picking exercise", arguing that it was natural for its lawyers to be involved in defending the company's position. "Brown & Williamson's lawyers have conducted themselves appropriately," it said.

But Stanton Glantz, a professor of medicine at UCSF, says that the reports and correspondence revealed an unprecedented manipulation of science. Most remarkable, he says, was the contrast between an extremely sophisticated internal scientific effort, and what he described as the "junk" science encouraged by the company through outside grants. But he says that the papers

also reveal that, over time, company lawyers were eventually able to exert control over internal projects as well.

The documents indicate that company scientists were decades ahead of mainstream researchers in understanding nicotine addiction, cancer, passive smoke, chronic bronchitis and the physics of smoke. But correspondence between company executives and their legal advisers suggest the

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**Lighting up: study claims that tobacco companies were way ahead in research.**

lawyers sought to keep findings away from the scientific community and the public.

In their report, the UCSF researchers detail documents showing that tobacco company lawyers reviewed scientific manuscripts before they were published, sometimes changing the language or citations to serve the company's purposes. The report also suggests the lawyers tried to halt discussion of certain topics among scientific colleagues, warning that statements seeming to admit that smoking caused cancer or other disease would be harmful in court.

The 8,000 pages of documents include hundreds of examples of the vast difference between the internal world of tobacco industry research and the face that the companies present to the outside world. "It's our first crack in the wall to see what was really going on in these places," says Glantz, who led the months-long inquiry by five specialists into the documents' contents. **Sally Lehrman**