A controversial choice?

The list of winners of the Gates Foundation grants has come under fire. Some researchers, including some winners, say in private that they are puzzled why certain projects were funded while others seen as more worthy were not.

This reflects the subjective nature of any review, other researchers say. But the secrecy of the process has fuelled speculation about bias. The review panel was anonymous, and researchers didn't receive the referee reports typically given during grant applications.

"The names of the external reviewers were kept confidential to protect them from inappropriate pressures," says José Esparza, senior adviser on HIV vaccines at the Gates Foundation. He adds that scores and recommendations were not passed to applicants as it was a one-off competition with no possibility of resubmission, and that potential conflicts of interest were disclosed to panellists and foundation staff.

Each proposal was reviewed by 11 external experts, says Esparza. The foundation approved the ten highest-scoring projects, then selected four others from a combination of their scores and more subjective criteria, such as "maintaining a balance of projects; supporting novel ideas; and ensuring they weren't duplicating projects already supported by other funders". Two final grants were awarded to central facilities that would support the other projects. **D.B.**

N. ROBERTS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Not everyone agrees with Bill Gates' idea of a mission-oriented approach to vaccine discovery.

next week's XVI International Aids Conference in Toronto, Canada. There are concerns about both the selection process (see 'A controversial choice?') and the wisdom of investing so much money in a big-science approach.

"We are having to learn a new culture and language relating to these milestones and directed research," says Robin Weiss of University College London, UK, who has won a $25.3-million grant. His consortium involves 11 labs in at least 6 countries. Getting them to work together effectively will be an organizational challenge, Weiss says, although he adds that they already "feel like a family". But Weiss is one of several AIDS researchers who argue that the community already cooperates well. "I was a little surprised at the implication that we needed the Gates Foundation to tell us to collaborate," he says.

Many researchers are concerned about the level of funding going to a mission-oriented approach versus investigator-driven science. "It's a difficult balance to get in vaccine discovery — it's not development, but research," says Weiss. "I don't think an AIDS vaccine has been held up because we didn't know how to collaborate. The limiting factor is a scientific breakthrough, a bright idea and new thinking."

Others argue that large mission-oriented grants could hold back the science. "You are going to get bad decisions," predicts one AIDS researcher who requested anonymity. He argues that the approach hands scientific choices to bureaucrats, and that the concentration of so much money in so few hands is a recipe for turf wars and nepotism — a criticism vocally expressed by US researchers left out of the CHAVI funding framework. He also questions whether large collaborations — which make sense in astronomy, where teams often study the same object at different wavelengths, or in tackling the vast amounts of data coming from the Human Genome Project — are as applicable to the experiments of vaccine research.

The task of making big science work for HIV falls to Adel Mahmoud, who will retire next month as president of Merck's Vaccine Division to become chief executive of the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise.

Kazatchkine for one is a convert, arguing that the "incredible egotism" of individuals and institutions often creates communities that lack the vision to organize themselves productively: "If Mahmoud succeeds, he will demonstrate a new way of doing science, where collaboration becomes as important as competition, giving research a new image." ■

Declan Butler

See also pages 602 and 617.

ON THE RECORD

"Americans aren't gullible enough to believe that they came from a fish."

Creationist John Morris on a new Museum of Creationism in Kentucky.

"Today, with all the pollution, you cannot get cleaner water than melted ice-cap water."

Salik Haard promotes his new beer, made with water from Greenland's shrinking glaciers.

NUMBER CRUNCH

Scientists this week announced the longest-ever electronic tracking of a migrating animal, a diminutive seabird called the sooty shearwater.

G. RESZETER/ARDEA.COM

65,000 km is the distance travelled by a sooty shearwater in 200 days.

5,000 km is the distance travelled each year by some caribou, the land animals that migrate the farthest.

800 g is the average weight of an adult sooty shearwater.

189 kg is the average weight of a caribou.

SCORECARD

▲ **Chemical analysis** Isotope ratio mass spectroscopy showed that testosterone found in the urine of Floyd Landis, winner of the Tour de France, did not have the same carbon isotope ratio as other hormones in the sample, showing it had a different, external source.

▼ **Climate porn** A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research, a UK think-tank, highlights the "quasi-religious register of doom, death, judgement, heaven and hell" in alarmist climate reporting that can become "secretly thrilling". This is not, the institute argues, a helpful way of framing things.

Sources: Associated Press, BBC News, Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA

SIDELINES

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