

Steady progress

Better budgets for biologists.

After years of rather disappointing funding news, things are looking up a little for US life scientists. On 31 January, Congress pledged to raise the 2007 budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) by \$620 million to \$29 billion, dispelling fears that the agency would be facing flat funding this year. But on 5 February, President George W. Bush called for 2008 funding at the biomedical research agency to be less than that (see page 572) — although Congress is likely to supplement it later in the year.

These developments together mark a modest success for the biomedical research lobby and for NIH director Elias Zerhouni. In the face of considerable scepticism, he argued that the NIH has made effective use of the doubling in funding that it received between 1998 and 2003. His push for 'translational medicine', with its emphasis on the transfer of ideas from the laboratory to the clinic, has helped to convince lawmakers that the agency is working hard to address America's healthcare needs.

The rapid expansion of the NIH was always likely to create a period of inflated expectations in biomedical research, during which researchers might feel short-changed. The funding boost was accompanied by a massive building boom at university medical centres and

by a flood of postdocs to staff them. It was inevitable, after five years of 15% compound growth came to an end in 2003, that someone's expectations weren't going to be met. The best that the life sciences could hope for was that there would be only a short pause before Congress resumed its long-standing love affair with the NIH.

This pause may now be coming to an end. If that were so, it would be due to the efforts of Zerhouni and his staff, but also to scientists' direct lobbying on their own behalf. Organizations such as the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) and the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB) have long urged researchers to become more involved in the political process, but have often felt that their calls go unheeded.

This time, scientists were listening. FASEB's Office of Public Affairs has announced that more than 15,000 scientists sent letters last summer urging public officials to reverse the slowdown in NIH funding, and more than 12,000 researchers have signed up to the organization's urgent-action e-mail list. At the ASCB meeting in December, a session on outreach and communication was packed, with standing-room only.

It would be unfortunate if this slightly better funding picture convinced researchers to drop their new-found level of political engagement. Scientists have plenty to do in their daily lives and may struggle to find time to write a letter to the newspaper, speak to a classroom at school, or even visit their Congressman. But in the end, such activities can pay dividends. ■

Welcome home

Italian and Spanish researchers returning from abroad deserve more support.

Most European nations bemoan an academic 'brain drain' that flows mostly in the direction of the United States. But the situation is not uniform. Germany, for example, is prone to grumble, but it has a well-funded, well-organized research infrastructure, and a regular supply of new academic positions. More than 80% of German scientists who go abroad for their PhDs or postdocs eventually return home.

Not all countries are so fortunate. When the infrastructure at home is poor, few migrants will return to the nest. Italy and Spain have both endured a prolonged haemorrhaging of talent. Having failed to invest properly in basic research for decades, both nations have recently attempted to plan a better future. In 2001, they each launched programmes specifically designed to entice well-trained scientists back home, by providing an attractive salary and research funding for up to five years.

Italy's 'Rientro dei cervelli' ('Brain gain') programme has so far brought back over 460 scientists; Spain's Ramon y Cajal scheme has attracted more than 2,000. The initial idea of both programmes was that researchers returning home would then be ideally placed to compete for local, permanent jobs. But thanks to bad planning, few of the returnees are as well-integrated as they had hoped. In the underfunded systems they found themselves in, few jobs became available.

The next step was therefore to encourage universities to create the required positions. Last year, Italy made an offer that, although modest, seemed to provide a solution. The government allocated €3 million (US\$3.9 million) a year to pay for 95% of the salaries of returning scientists who were deemed worthy of a permanent position by their university departments.

But much of the money remains unspent. Many universities did not nominate candidates — partly because they see the 'Brain gain' programme as institutionalized queue-jumping, pushing returning scientists ahead of those who stayed at home waiting for jobs to show up. Most of the nominations were blocked on technical grounds by the similarly unsympathetic National Committee of Universities, which has to verify the eligibility of all candidate professors.

Two years ago, the Spanish government made a similar offer, to fund the full costs of the first three years of 900 new academic posts. But uptake by universities has been patchy.

Full cooperation from the universities is essential if such schemes are to work. It would not have been easy — universities hate being told who to hire — but it should have been sought from the start.

Measures to bring in new talent are essential if Spain and Italy are to meet their scientific aspirations. It is now up to the universities to see the bigger picture and show more flexibility in supporting returning scientists. ■

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