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Putting pathogens first

If President George W. Bush's latest budget request is approved, basic immunology research in the United States will receive a shot in the arm. The plan, announced last week, would raise the budget at the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) by 57% to \$4 billion, with the majority of this increase being directed at bioterrorism-related research. This is the single biggest non-defence item in Bush's bioterrorism proposal, which was prompted by the anthrax attacks that followed the 11 September hijackings and crashes.

Such an infusion of cash will create opportunities. But will they be constrained to bioterrorism applications? Anthony Fauci, NIAID director, offers assurances that the funds will pay for work "well beyond" the top five or six pathogens. "The entire field of infectious diseases and immunology will get a boost," he says.

The exact model for that boost remains unclear. But a contract between the NIAID and The Institute of Genomic Research (TIGR) in Rockville, Maryland, signed before the budget announcement, offers a hint of what is to come. The NIAID is paying TIGR to come up with tools to study pathogens whose genetic sequences are, or will soon be, known. This covers areas such as microarrays, genotyping, clone access and bioinformatics. TIGR will start with three pathogens and expand its scope as the project goes on.

It is safe to forecast that more pathogen sequencing and functional genomics will be in the pipeline, and that people who can contribute to those projects will be in demand. The unknown remains how individual investigators will be charged with using these data once they are produced. Will the resources be concentrated at a few centres or distributed more widely? With the amount of money available, it seems there would be room for both approaches — and the nature of the problem suggests that it would be prudent to support both.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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