

...and reject NIH funds

The use of federal funds for human embryonic stem (ES)-cell research in the US remains controversial, and in another twist in the contentious field, the National Institutes of Health awarded its first stem-cell grant on 7 February to the American Red Cross, which promptly turned it down.

The money—\$50,000 in a supplement to an existing grant—was to go to Robert Hawley of the Jerome H. Holland Laboratories of the American Red Cross in Rockville, Maryland. The supplement was to have allowed him to translate his blood development work from mouse ES-cell

lines to human ES cells following the recent discovery that human ES cells can be directed to develop into blood cells (*Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* 98, 10716; 2001).

Some large charities, such as the American Heart Association, have shied away from stem-cell research, for fear of alienating financial donors. There was speculation that this was the reason for the Red Cross's decision. In addition, the organization has been under attack recently for its handling of blood and monetary donations after the 11 September terrorist attacks.

However, Jerry Squires, chief scientific officer at the Red Cross, insists the decision

to refuse the money was based on new scientific priorities, and denied that it was an attempt to avoid controversy. "The application for the supplemental grant was submitted in August 2001," prior to Squires becoming chief scientific officer, he told *Nature Medicine*. "Since that time, the American Red Cross has reviewed and refined its strategic research priorities. These do not include the work described in the supplement. Therefore, the American Red Cross has decided not to accept the grant." Instead, Squires wants researchers to focus on work involving stem cells from umbilical cord blood.

Marlene Cimons, Washington, D.C.

New study on aging heart

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has awarded \$1.7 million to University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas to define the biology of diastolic heart failure—the main cause of heart failure in the elderly—and determine whether exercise can prevent or reverse the condition.

Historically, exercise research has not been a major focus of NIH funding. Frank Booth, professor in the department of Physiology at the University of Missouri, Columbia, who founded the Researchers Against Inactivity-related Disorders (RID) group in 2000, has spearheaded an effort to get federal agencies to increase funding for research that examines the link between physical inactivity and disease. He looks forward to more NIH funding as the population ages.

"It is clear is that the incidence of physical frailty is climbing and preventive medicine—exercise and proper nutrition—is a proven means to alleviate and prevent many of the chronic diseases associated with the elderly," he says.

Until now, most insights into the biology of diastolic heart failure have come from animal studies, and little is known about what happens in humans. In particular, it is not clear "whether changes in the heart are due to senescence that occurs with aging or just due to de-conditioning of the heart muscles," says UT Southwestern lead investigator, Benjamin Levine.

As people age and become less active, the heart muscle stiffens. Because the ventricles are less able to relax, the heart cannot fill as readily in preparation for each heartbeat—a condition known as diastolic dysfunction. Pressure inside the ventricles builds up as blood tries to enter, which can

cause extra pressure and fluid in the lungs and other body tissues, leading to heart failure. Around 40% of all patients over age 65 who are hospitalized with heart failure have diastolic dysfunction as the primary manifestation of their heart failure. "We don't know whether congestive heart failure is just an exaggerated form diastolic dysfunction or if there something else going on," says Levine.

The study will examine aspects of diastolic dysfunction in seniors with a history of heart failure and those without. It will take four years to complete, and use some classical invasive techniques for taking

pressure/volume heart measurements. It will also use newer techniques like doppler echocardiography and magnetic resonance imaging to precisely determine how easily heart muscle relaxes and contracts in older individuals and whether exercise will affect heart function.

In FY2000, 13% of the American population was aged over 65 and the proportion of elderly is projected to increase to 20% by 2030. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of the population over 50 is sedentary.

Laura Bonetta, Bethesda

Spanish scientists broke

Eight of Spain's biomedical research organizations have sent a joint manifesto to the press complaining that their members have received none of the government money they were promised for research over six months ago. Entitled *The Chaos of Biomedical Research Funding in Spain*, the document says, "[we] intend to express the disquiet of the scientific community regarding the financing policy of basic biomedical research," and claims "the work of basic biomedical research groups is being considerably distorted [by the problem]."

The manifesto continues, "many groups have been forced to use internal loans" so that "research activities do not come to a halt." Ana Aranda, head of the Department of Regulation of Gene Expression at the Institute of Biomedical Research in Madrid, who is waiting on funds approved last July says that some research groups owe millions of pesetas to other groups, both for consumables and salaries. The manifesto concludes, "This situation is unprecedented in the recent history of science policy in Spain."

Molecular biologist Rosario Perona, secretary of the Spanish Association of Cancer Research, says that the manifesto prompted a meeting with officials from the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (MST), who claimed that the delay was due merely to poor synchronization in advertising the research projects. At the 4 February meeting, researchers pushed the MST for a 30-day deadline for receiving the money.

Jaime Lissavetzky, spokesman for the socialist party's science commission at the Parliament, says that additional delay resulted from the change-over of currency to the Euro. Questions about the missing funds were due to be asked in the Spanish parliament last month.

XAVIER BOSCH, BARCELONA