US to make research marijuana more accessible

In a major policy shift, the Clinton administration has decided to release its hold on "research grade" marijuana, making it available to scientists who seek to study its medical benefits. The decision, announced by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), will open the way to new privately funded research in the field.

The issue has been a contentious and political one abroad as well as the US. Last month, Canadian Health Minister, Allan Rock, authorized the medical use of marijuana (to two AIDS patients) for the first time. In February, United Nations officials called for increased research into its therapeutic benefits, and last year the UK awarded a license to GW Pharmaceuticals to cultivate marijuana and investigate its medical uses. Marijuana reportedly eases pain and quells nausea in cancer, HIV and multiple sclerosis patients.

The American clamor for medical marijuana has been bolstered by a March report by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), which identified the need to study the drug in clinical trials. The National Institutes of Health has already begun testing the effects of marijuana on HIV-associated pain and has called for additional studies (*Nature Med.* **3**, 943; 1997). Several US states have approved laws permitting its medical use, but have been challenged by the federal government (*Nature Med.* **3**, 134; 1997).

For more than 20 years, the production and distribution of marijuana for clinical research in the US has been restricted under federal law, making it all but impossible for non-federally funded researchers to obtain the plant. It is grown by the government in a special plot at the University of Mississippi.

Under the new policy, private researchers, including physicians, will be allowed to purchase and use marijuana for studies. AIDS researcher Donald Abrams, San Francisco General Hospital, who received a rare NIH grant last year to study the use of marijuana in HIV patients, said the government's action "will make it easier" for researchers, but points out that scientists still face the problem of funding. "[This may] eliminate the step of having to apply to the government for a [special] grant, but where are you going to get research funding? Drug companies won't support you—they can't patent marijuana."

In recognizing the need for objective evaluation of the potential medical use of cannabinoids, the HHS states, "If a positive benefit is found, HHS also recognize the need to stimulate development of alternative, safer dosage forms. Researchers seeking access to the drug must be involved in studies that generally follow guidelines from the IOM report.

In other news...

The University of Minnesota is to repay $11,000 to the NIH as a reimbursement for grant money misappropriated by assistant professor Keith Kajander, who died of a cocaine overdose in April.

Kajander used cocaine for pain research, and took receipt of 140 grams of cocaine over a seven-year period; however, a University audit could not determine the quantity used in his experiments, and thus decided that the funds should be returned. An internal Task Force began a review of University use of controlled substances on June 17th.

MARLENE CIMONS, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Student drop-outs cause university ranking fears

Signals from the Australian government that universities may be financially penalized unless they improve their performance and the rate at which students complete doctoral degrees have irritated the research sector.

Michael Gallagher, director of the federal Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) higher education division, startled a University of New South Wales postgraduate symposium by asking whether Australia was "getting an efficient outcome from time and money invested" in higher research degrees.

DETYA figures show that fewer than half of the doctoral students enrolled in the early 1990s completed their degree in five years. Of the 3,493 doctoral students enrolled in 1992, only 1,498, or 43 percent, completed their degree in 1997. Science PhD students performed better than most, with a 51 percent completion rate, compared to 29 percent for arts.

Gallagher's comments—that the data provided no evidence that the present approach to research training was "appropriate, responsive, efficient, effective or of adequate quality"—have been interpreted by the research sector to mean that the government may be considering a new form of benchmarking, with the threat of funding being tied to efficiencies. "It's inevitable that when figures like this are published and commented on by a senior public servant that people at universities get nervous," David Siddle, pro-vice-chancellor (research) at the University of Sydney, told *Nature Medicine*.

Siddle is dubious of the claim that nearly half of the students are "dropping out," and questions whether DETYA has taken into account individuals who have upgraded their study, or switched disciplines or universities.

His scepticism about 'rubbery' figures is backed by the president of the Australian Council of Deans of Science, Rob Norris, who also questions whether DETYA was able to track the cohort properly. "I suspect there is the usual witchhunt on to further justify reductions in university funds," says Norris. The Council's past president, John Rice, warns that the government will damage higher education if it attempts to "come up with a naive system of benchmarks" whereby research funding is distributed to areas with apparently higher completion rates.

However, no one is arguing with the statistics that show a switch in emphasis in doctoral commencements from science and technology (down seven percent) to the social sciences (up seven percent) over the last ten years. Australian Society for Medical Research spokeswoman Moira Clay believes it reflects the poor funding for science over the last decade, which the government has just only begun to acknowledge with a boost in the federal budget for biomedical research (*Nature Med.* **5**, 598; 1999).

It's going to take a while to turn around a situation where science departments across Australia have been losing five to 20 percent of staff each year, says Norris, adding that so long as governments regard universities as no more than sausage factories, they will continue to press for "measures to churn out the cheapest sausages."

RADA ROUSE, BRISBANE