

UK science dealt lighter blow than other sectors in budget cuts

As many European countries adopt austerity measures, lawmakers have chipped away at science budgets. Despite concerns that the UK science budget would be substantially cut as part of a comprehensive spending review, the government announced on 20 October that the budget will be frozen in cash terms. This means that the total science budget will stay at around £4.6 billion (\$7.3 billion) a year until the 2014–2015 fiscal year, although it is likely to fall by around 10% in real terms over that period as a result of anticipated inflation.

The news was even better for biomedical research: the UK Medical Research Council's annual budget, which is currently just over £700 million, will be maintained and adjusted for any inflation, and the UK Department of Health's annual research spending will increase by over 10% to £1.1 billion by that time. In addition, £220 million of capital funding from the Department of Health will be earmarked for building the proposed UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation.

The budget decision “demonstrates that the government understands the importance of research and innovation in securing the UK's economic recovery,” Nigel Gaymond, chief executive of the UK BioIndustry Association, said in a statement.

The spending review was instigated by the Conservative-Liberal coalition government to determine how it will achieve its previously announced goal of reducing annual government spending by £83 billion over the next four years.

Most government departments were warned to expect budget cuts of around 25%, including the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which is responsible for the science budget. So scientists braced for major cuts in their funding.

This fear was further stoked by a speech given by Vince Cable, the business secretary, in September, in which he said his preference was to refocus research spending on those areas of science where the UK is a ‘world leader’. He identified stem cells and regenerative medicine as two areas where British research is world class.

A number of British scientists and scientific bodies warned about the damaging effects that major cuts would have on the UK science base and the UK economy in general. It now seems that these warnings were heeded.

At the beginning of October, Spain also announced it would freeze its science budget for 2011, which at €5.3 billion (\$7.4 billion) will be about the same as it was this year. However,

the Confederation of Spanish Scientific Societies claimed that, when also including the research activities in various government ministries, research spending would actually fall by over 8%. Meanwhile, in France, the

Ministry of Science and Higher Education and Ministry of Justice were the only two spared in deficit-reduction measures announced as part of the 2011 budget.

Jon Evans

Affirmative inaction at the FDA

After an advisory committee to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) votes on whether to approve a new medicine, the standard mantra is that the agency doesn't have to follow its panel's advice, but, by and large, it does. However, according to a new analysis from Prevision Policy, a Washington, DC-based healthcare policy group, over the past four years the FDA has followed its committees' advice only 76% of the time.

Although the FDA ignores its advisors almost a quarter of the time, the analysis revealed that the agency has overturned a ‘no’ vote from its panels only three times since 2007, and in every case the reversal was for a product already on the market but seeking new indications, not for a new molecular entity. In other words, “a ‘no’ is going to stick for a new product,” says Ramsey Baghdadi, an analyst with Prevision Policy in Washington, DC. “But if you get a ‘yes’, you've got a 25% chance that it could be reversed based on those hard data points.”

FDA Drugs Advisory Committee	FDA decisions consistent with advisory committee vote (2007-2010)
Anesthetic and Life Support	78% (n = 9)
Anti-Infective	75% (8)
Anti-Viral	80% (5)
Arthritis	71% (7)
Cardio-Renal	62% (13)
Dermatologic and Ophthalmic	71% (7)
Endocrinologic and Metabolic	88% (8)
Gastrointestinal	100% (4)
Oncologic	82% (22)
Peripheral and Central Nervous System	86% (7)
Psychopharmacologic	77% (13)
Pulmonary-Allergy	63% (8)
Reproductive Health	67% (9)

Stem cell support cuts across party lines

Over the past decade, federal funding for embryonic stem cell research in the US has been held up continuously by rogue players—first by former President George W. Bush who established an executive order in 2001 limiting funding and twice vetoed legislation to expand the scope of such research, and now by a US district court judge's decision that threatens to halt taxpayer supported embryonic stem cell science altogether.

But these actions do not reflect the will of the US public. In fact, nowadays a majority of Americans think research involving stem cells derived from embryos left over from *in vitro* fertilization procedures is acceptable. “It underscores the fact that disease and disability are not partisan,” says Mary Woolley, president of Research!America, an advocacy group based in Alexandria, Virginia. “The American public doesn't see it that way, even if on occasion their elected officials take sides in a partisan way.”

The most recent poll, conducted five weeks after the 23 August temporary injunction by Harris Interactive and HealthDay, surveyed more than 2,100 adults ages 18 and over.

Percentage supporting stem cell research

