

## NEW WORLD

# Cries of Distress from the Medical Schools

by our Washington Correspondent

FOR the past few years medical schools in the United States have been caught in a financial squeeze and there has been persistent talk of budgetary crises. But the talk turned to cries of anguish in January this year when President Nixon's budget for 1974 was published—for the first time, the schools are faced with an absolute cut in federal funds, and with the abolition of some cherished programmes. Exactly what effect the proposed cuts will have on the medical schools has, however, been a matter of some debate, and so the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) has conducted a survey of its members to find out. The results, published last week, confirm the worst.

According to replies from 78 of the 113 medical schools in the United States, the proposed funding cuts will result in a reduction in staff of at least 1,400—one out of twelve faculty members—possible reduction in enrolments, curtailment of some programmes designed to assist minority and disadvantaged students and a variety of other cost-cutting measures. Small wonder that Dr John A. D. Cooper, president of the AAMC, last week called the proposed 1974 budget "a serious blow to medical education, biomedical research and health care in this country".

Although the medical schools receive funds from a variety of sources, they have become increasingly dependent on the federal government for their money: in 1972, for example, the government provided 44 per cent of the total income of the medical schools. But dependence on federal financing has made the schools particularly susceptible to vagaries in the budget, clashes between Congress and the White House and the whims of officials in the Office of Management and Budget.

In the early 1960s, their finances were relatively healthy, largely because of the rapid increase in the budget of the National Institutes of Health and the consequent flow of research money into the universities and their medical facilities. But the schools' troubles began with the levelling off in research funds of the late 1960s and early 1970s, went from bad to worse when Congress and the White House failed to reach agreement on the appropriations bill for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare last year (see *Nature*, 242, 81, 1973), and will deteriorate even further if the Administration's plans for next

year are carried out. The schools' financial ills are also exacerbated by the fact that they have nearly all been increasing their intake in response to present and projected shortages of doctors.

President Nixon's budget for 1974 provided a double blow to the medical schools, for not only did it propose to cut back on spending in 1974, but it also outlined cuts that the Administration intended to make in its own estimates for 1973. The schools are therefore faced with an immediate cut that they had not anticipated, and the prospect of much less money in 1974 than they had bargained for. According to the AAMC survey, the 1974 funds proposed in the Administration's budget are at least 25 per cent less than the schools planned for.

Among the programmes which the Administration plans to cut or abolish, training grants and fellowships, and research grants and contracts from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) constitute the biggest loss to the medical schools. According to the AAMC survey, the 78 medical schools which took part estimated before the Administration's budget was published, that they would receive \$599 million from these programmes in 1974, but the budget only contains \$465.3 million—23 per cent less than they had planned for. The schools are also suffering from abolition of regional medical programmes and savage cuts in special project grants and general research support grants. One effect of the cutbacks at NIH is that the support of new applications—as opposed to continuing the funding for present projects—will decline by 40 per cent.

According to the AAMC survey, these will be the chief consequences of the cutbacks:

- About 8 per cent of the faculty members and 15 per cent of supporting staff of US medical schools will have to be discharged unless alternative sources of funding can be found
- Curriculum innovations, such as early clinical experience and shortened courses, will suffer
- The abolition of Regional Medical Programs will, according to Dr Cooper, "seriously curtail the ability of the medical schools to become involved in community health programmes"
- One-third of the schools responding to the survey indicated that they may have to reduce the size of the enrolments, and some have already decided to do so
- Some entire research programmes will be stopped.

What are the chances that at least some of the money will be restored to the health budget? There is little doubt that Congress will try to keep the abolished programmes alive, and that it will substantially increase the President's budget request. But the problem is that the White House is still holding the whip hand in budgetary matters. In the present fiscal year, the Office of Management and Budget simply refused to spend several hundred million dollars which Congress had appropriated for various programmes because the Administration wanted to cut down on federal expenditure. Although that precipitated a bitter power struggle between Congress and the White House over which branch of government con-

## Shuttle Wins, Science Loses

THE space shuttle easily survived its first Congressional hurdle this year when the House of Representatives last week passed the NASA authorizations bill. An amendment to the bill, seeking to delete the \$500 million dollars earmarked for the shuttle, was easily defeated by 95 votes to 20. Congressional critics of the project have three more chances to get rid of the shuttle during the next few months, when the authorizations bill comes before the Senate and when the appropriations bills are considered by each house.

As far as the rest of NASA's budget is concerned, the Committee on Science

and Astronautics, which drew up the authorizations bill, reduced the budget request for physics and astronomy by \$5 million, and the request for lunar and planetary sciences by \$2 million. The money saved from these programmes should be added to the Earth Resources Technology Satellite programme, the committee suggested. The effects of the cuts on space science—if they are agreed to by the Senate—are not yet known, but it is possible that the Atmospheric Explorer satellite may be delayed by about 6 months. But, at least at present, no senior challenge seems to be facing the shuttle.