

Lobbyists elated as the NIH wins \$2bn budget increase

[WASHINGTON] US biomedical research is set to receive an unprecedented infusion of cash. President Bill Clinton and the Congress finally agreed last week to a budget for 1999 that will increase the funding of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) by \$2 billion, to \$15.6 billion.

This 15 per cent increase is the amount requested for NIH last December by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), but which few of its members expected to attain. NIH institutes have been planning for months, however, in expectation of an increase greater than the 8 per cent that Clinton requested for the agency in February.

"We're elated over the NIH budget," says Bill Brinkley, president of FASEB and vice-president of Baylor College of Medicine at Houston, Texas. The money "can be spent well," he adds, predicting that NIH funding "is now on line for doubling in five years, from \$13 billion to \$27 billion".

The budget includes increases of around 15 per cent for most NIH institutes and centres. Of the larger ones, the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute and the National Center for Research Resources do best, with rises of 17 per cent and 22 per cent respectively.

The final agreement is even more gener-

ous than the highest NIH budget brought to the negotiating table, the one proposed by the Senate. An extra \$40 million of research spending was released at the last minute, with \$15 million of it going to the National Human Genome Research Institute, whose budget will grow by more than 20 per cent.

When Clinton first proposed an 8 per cent increase for NIH, the extra funding was supposed to be contingent on legislation to introduce new tobacco taxes (see *Nature* 391, 521–522; 1998). This legislation failed but, as expected, Clinton and the Congress managed to find a way to appropriate spending far in excess of the legally-binding budget caps they had agreed last year.

By designating \$20 billion as "emergency spending", the two sides were able to fund most of each others' priorities, while technically remaining inside the law.

Not every such priority was funded, however. Clinton's Climate Change Technology Initiative will develop more slowly than he had planned. This research programme is supposed to help the United States reduce its greenhouse-gas emissions, and has been opposed by the Congress on ideological grounds. Clinton requested an extra \$450 million for the initiative in 1999. Although details remain sketchy, he is expected to obtain about half that.

Colin MacIlwain



Meldrum: still in the limelight.

Top BSE official denies charges of excessive secrecy

[LONDON] Keith Meldrum, the British government's chief veterinary officer during the crisis over bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), last week defended his handling of the affair to a public inquiry.

One of the most pivotal figures during the crisis, Meldrum strenuously denied that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food put the interests of industry above those of public health, and refused to criticize the conduct of ministers.

"Those that would suggest that we tended to adopt policies that would favour the agriculture industry and to their advantage and to some extent therefore ignore the consumer would be totally wrong," said Meldrum. He did, however, acknowledge that, unlike the chief medical officer, he was unable to articulate a view that went against government policy.

Meldrum was speaking on Monday (19 October) at the start of his two-day appearance before the BSE inquiry in London, which was in its 68th day. Meldrum told the inquiry that, although he supported the principle of external advisory committees, he did not always agree with the need for them, particularly where relevant expertise existed within government laboratories.

Meldrum also claimed that the ministry had an "open policy", and "attempted as far as we were able" to keep all parties fully informed of all aspects of BSE. But he said that, although committed to giving the public "the full facts", he felt that the media did not always convey all the relevant details.

"How do you ensure that the consumer, the public, is fully informed about the risk and risk assessment to look at the safety of food?" he asked. "The problem is that there is no direct route to the public except through the media. You can produce leaflets, but it is difficult to get the public to read them."

Meldrum said he would reconsider his decision not to provide the committee with access to a complete tape recorded interview on the BSE affair he gave to researchers from the University of Surrey.

Ehsan Masood

Spain's cardiologists rally to Moncada

[BARCELONA] The Spanish Society of Cardiology (SEC) plans to make a formal protest about last week's decision by the Nobel committee to exclude Salvador Moncada from those awarded this year's prize for physiology or medicine.

The award was made to Robert Furchgott, Louis Ignarro and Ferid Murad for the discovery and elucidation of the biological functions of the gas nitric oxide (see *Nature* 395, 625–626; 1998). No mention was made of Moncada, who has been a prominent figure in the study of the properties of nitric oxide since demonstrating in 1987 that it is identical to Furchgott's endothelium-derived relaxing factor.

Moncada was born in Honduras and educated at the University of El Salvador, and is currently at the Wolfson Institute for Biomedical Research at University College London. He has long enjoyed close links with cardiology researchers in Spain, partly as a result of a common linguistic and cultural background.

Members of SEC were preparing to

release a formal protest to the Nobel committee on Wednesday (21 October) to coincide with the opening of the National Congress of Cardiology in Malaga.

Alfonso Castro Beiras, president of the society and head of the Department of Cardiology at the Juan Canalejo Hospital at La Coruña, says that the note is intended to express SEC's unhappiness that Moncada's contributions to the field of nitric oxide research appear to have been ignored. According to Castro Beiras, many members of the society are expected to voice their criticism during the meeting.

Ironically, Enrique Castellon, deputy head of Spain's Ministry of Health, announced last week that the country's 1999 budget for public health will include an extra US\$2.6 million to create a centre for cardiovascular research. The centre will be along similar lines to the recently established National Institute of Oncology, headed by Mariano Barbacid. The new centre's main focus will be studies of nitric oxide as a signalling molecule in the cardiovascular system.

Xavier Bosch