

# US biomedical research threatened

## New director at NIH faces discontent

### Washington

The primary sponsor of US biomedical research, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), is at last, after a ten-month hiatus, getting a new director. He is Dr James B. Wyngaarden, whom the Administration and the biomedical community agree is a good choice. Wyngaarden had his Senate confirmation hearing last week and is expected to be confirmed and sworn in within the next few weeks. But he will be inheriting a storm.

When Wyngaarden moves in to NIH's blossoming campus on the fringes of Washington, he will have to face the anger of deans and administrative officers of the 2,500 medical schools and universities in the United States who receive NIH funds and who are furious with NIH for proposing to cut their indirect cost allowance by 10 per cent in 1983. Although the immediate sum involved is a trivial \$70 million in NIH's proposed \$3,700 million budget, the administrators fear that the cut portends a fundamental shift in the structure of the US university economy. Whether it does or not depends on Congress, which may yet restore the money.

Wyngaarden, 57 and a Democrat, is Hanes Professor of Medicine and chairman of the department of medicine at Duke University School of Medicine in North Carolina. Among other Washington assignments, he has served on the President's Science Advisory Committee. His nomination was backed by NIH's many supporters on Capitol Hill, and by Richard S. Schweiker, the chief of NIH's parent Department of Health and Human Services, who is himself a former congressional backer of NIH. Although some of the Reagan Administration's key science appointees have included unknowns or outsiders to the basic science community, Wyngaarden is neither.

Wyngaarden's first job will be to find directors for the five NIH institutes which are without permanent directors, some since January 1981. Another key post, that of deputy director of NIH for science, is also vacant. The previous director, Donald Frederickson, drew up lists of candidates last July, and Wyngaarden will have to see how many candidates are still interested in the jobs. In federal research agencies, when a permanent chief is lacking, normal business continues. What suffers is the organization's internal needs and long-term planning.

Wyngaarden inherits a dispute over indirect cost allowances that is dividing university administrators and faculty across the country. The bulk of NIH funds for research project grants and research centres is awarded in two parts. The first part is the direct cost of the research — salaries, equipment, travel, publications, and the like. The second part covers indirect costs, a percentage of the direct costs that the government agrees to pay to the researcher's home institution to keep him housed. Indirect costs include such things as central fuel and electricity bills, cleaning, library and central animal facilities.

Previously NIH reimbursed the institutions a fixed 15 per cent of a researcher's direct costs, no matter what they were. However, this was deemed arbitrary and NIH allowed the percentage it would repay to grow, frequently reassessing it to take account of rising utility costs and inflation. For 1983, NIH estimates that indirect cost payments on research grants and centres will average 30 per cent of the direct costs. Other federal agencies that fund research follow the same process but with percentages that vary among agencies and universities. (The

resulting patchwork of repayments would be unbearable for university administrators were the funds not essential for their hard-pressed institutions.)

Thus, while the growth in research budgets has tended to slow in recent years, indirect costs have kept on rising. A Columbia professor estimated recently that fifteen years ago his research supported by NIH enabled Columbia to collect \$2,000 in indirect cost repayments. During that time, even though his research effort has only doubled, Columbia has been able to collect \$40,000 in indirect cost reimbursements on it.

However, the array of administrators and their representative societies, such as the Association of American Medical Colleges and the Association of American Universities who oppose the NIH plans to reduce its contribution to administrative costs, are not merely concerned about paying next year's heating bills. They claim that NIH is shifting the whole debate about what the institutes are for and how they should maintain US world leadership in biomedical research.

During his six years as NIH director, Frederickson argued that researchers suffered from uncertainty as to what would

## Franco-Soviet space flight plea

Three pressure groups of French scientists and intellectuals, "Comité des Physiciens Français", "Comité Sakharov" and "Solidarité au Spacinaute", have called for France to withdraw from the Franco-Soviet manned spaceflight planned for June.

Following the procedure of the manned Interkosmos flights, which included representatives of all Comecon block countries, two French candidates for space — Jean-Loup Chretien and Patrick Baudry, are now training in the Soviet Union. One of these will be selected to be launched with a Soviet partner to rendezvous with and work aboard the Salyut-7 space station put into orbit last week.

The pressure groups base their demand on the recent increase of human rights violations in the Soviet bloc — the invasion of Afghanistan, the banishment of Sakharov, martial law in Poland. For a relatively minor scientific gain, they say, France would be reduced to a "supernumerary" in a Soviet public-relations spectacular. The propaganda value to the Soviet Union of a joint flight involving, for the first time, a guest from outside the Socialist bloc, would be immense.

For all three groups agree that at this stage France stands to gain little from the proposed manned flight. Franco-Soviet cooperation in space goes back to the visit of President de Gaulle to Baikonur in 1966,

and over the years has included a laser ranging experiment on the lunokhod Moon-rover, gamma ray spectrometers carried aboard Venus probes, and the launching by the Soviet Union of the French Aureole geophysical satellites. French participation is also planned in the Soviet mission to Venus and Halley's comet in 1985.



The proposed French participation in the Salyut mission would cover three main fields, astrophysics, materials sciences and biology. Comité de Physiciens Français, in particular, contends that the first two programmes could be carried out equally well aboard an unmanned automated spacecraft. As for the biology programme, this will simply allow the "well-known" physiological stresses of space to be applied for the first time to a French citizen.

Vera Rich