

NIH research grants

Multi-year grants on ice*Washington*

THE Reagan administration's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has struck a compromise with leaders of the Republican-controlled Senate over the number of new research grants to be awarded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). According to the agreement, the number of such grants awarded each year would settle at around 5,500, 10 per cent above the current level but considerably below the 6,500 foreseen last year by Congress.

The agreement, if accepted on the floor of the House of Representatives and of the Senate, might defuse the confrontation with the White House over OMB's scheme to circumvent the wishes of Congress by instructing NIH to hold back \$200 million of the \$938 million that had been intended for this year's grants (see *Nature* 313, 377; 1985). The issue of NIH grants remains controversial in Congress, however, and the agreement of both houses is by no means assured.

Congress, ever-generous to NIH, last year voted it a large budget increase and urged increasing the number of new and competing research grants awarded each year from 5,000 to 6,500. Because grants last typically for three years, however, Congress's action would have meant further large increases for the NIH budget in 1986 and 1987. OMB, seeking to reduce the federal budget deficit, told NIH to disregard the new grant figures suggested by Congress and to hold the number steady at 5,000; the \$200 million left over as a result should be used to support second- and third-year grant continuations in 1986 and 1987.

The legal basis for OMB's action was

questioned last month by the US Comptroller General, who was responding to a query by Senator Lowell Weicker. The Comptroller General's opinion was that the executive branch was not legally obliged to follow the wishes expressed in congressional appropriation committee reports about the number of grants NIH should support; on the other hand, OMB's specific plan, to fund 646 multi-year grants with the 1985 appropriation, was found to be illegal.

The administration has challenged the Comptroller General's opinion, and in the meantime the \$200 million in question is being held in reserve: the matter has been referred to the Justice Department for a second opinion. As a compromise, the administration has undertaken that NIH should not commit funds to any multi-year grants before 1 July, by which time the question of legality will presumably have been sorted out.

Last week's agreement with Republican leaders refers formally only to fiscal year 1986 and beyond; it does not address the problem of what to do about this year's appropriation. It is thought likely, however, that the same figure of 5,500 new grants might be an acceptable compromise for this year as well. The administration would nevertheless still like to establish the legality of multi-year funding, despite certain opposition from Congress. Should legal obstacles prevent this, all the \$200 million now being held back would have to be spent this year. One possibility being explored is that it might be used for a one-time-only extension of grants that narrowly failed to be extended this year: this would placate many disappointed researchers without incurring the commitment of a new three-year grant.

Tim Beardsley

UK embryo research

Government stops Powell bill

The British government has now decided effectively to block the Unborn Children (Protection) Bill in its passage through the final stages of procedure in the House of Commons. The bill, which seeks to prevent the use of *in vitro* fertilized embryos for purposes other than to bring to term a particular fetus, was introduced by Mr Enoch Powell, MP, and received a large majority (127) at its second reading (see *Nature* 21 February, p.618). On 3 May, when the bill is due to be referred back to the House of Commons from committee, the government has decided not to provide enough time for debate, so that the bill's opponents will be able to talk it out. This decision has infuriated supporters of Mr Powell's bill, who argue that it should receive government backing because of the large percentage of MPs in favour of it.

A Marplan opinion poll published in

Britain this week, however, reveals that 32 per cent of adults are in favour of embryo research, 41 per cent are against and 27 per cent "don't know". Nearly half of the opponents changed their minds when asked if they would favour research if it would help to eliminate genetic diseases, resulting in a total of 51 per cent in favour of research.

The government plans to introduce its own legislation, possibly in the parliamentary session beginning next October, based on the findings of the Warnock committee (see *Nature* 312, 389; 1984). This legislation will be more comprehensive than Mr Powell's bill; Mr Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, is pledged to prevent commercial surrogacy agencies of any kind from operating in Britain, and this will be included in the government's plans.

Maxine Clarke

Algal structures



FIXED algae have been used for many purposes, but rarely for making what the French sculptor Ernest Pignon-Ernest calls "arbrorigènes". This pun on the French words for "tree" (*arbre*) and "aborigine" describes a collection of life-sized models carved out of polystyrene and containing fixed *Porphyridium cruentum*, a reddish single-celled alga that gives the polystyrene flesh tones. Pignon-Ernest's models now adorn the trees of the Paris Jardin des Plantes. The sculptor is fascinated by the idea that these sculptures need water and light.

Pignon-Ernest is not a scientist. He conceived the idea of using fixed algae, however, and approached biotechnologist Daniel Thomas of the University of Compiègne and his colleagues Claude Gudin of the solar biotechnology laboratory at Cadarache for ideas. Thomas, who specializes in cell and enzyme-fixing, had the technology of fixing *P. cruentum* (a common garden species) in polystyrene, and Gudin has been using it to produce polysaccharides using solar energy. (When its environment dries, the organism protects itself by secreting a sugary shell.) Pignon-Ernest found the material ideal, and the "breathing" arbrorigènes were the result.

Thomas, meanwhile, was also at work with another artist, Monet — or at least with his enormous "water-lilies", a 186 sq. m. canvas hanging in the Louvre gallery in Paris. This painting was damaged when it was first transported. Paper was glued to the surface of the paint to protect it, but the wrong glue was used and the picture remained misted and in danger of denaturing by interaction of glue and paint. Thomas came to the rescue, discovered the glue was starch-based and dissolved it off with enzymes. Which proves that biotechnology has its uses, even if those uses will have little effect on share prices...

Robert Walgate