

# Academy and presidential panel issue AIDS reports

■ Sweeping recommendations made

■ Conflicting views on national commission

## Washington

THE debate over the best way to address the mounting AIDS epidemic reopened last week with the release of reports by both the US Presidential Commission on the HIV Epidemic and a panel set up by the US National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the Institute of Medicine. While the reports differ in many of their detailed recommendations, they both state that federal efforts to coordinate a response to the AIDS epidemic have been insufficient, slow and poorly led.

The NAS report is a follow-up to its 1986 document entitled *Confronting AIDS*, one of the first comprehensive studies to outline the catastrophic effects of the disease on US society and to make recommendations on research and health care. The revision does not repeat the earlier version's criticism that federal organization and the government's effort in education are "woefully inadequate", but does say that there is still an "absence of strong Federal leadership".

To fill the need for leadership, the NAS report calls for the creation of a national commission to replace the Presidential Commission on the HIV Epidemic, once that disbands after its final report to the White House later this month. The commission would report directly to the President for a renewable term of five years, and be active in directing efforts to combat AIDS. This is the second time the NAS has recommended the creation of a national commission.

Theodore Cooper, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Upjohn and chairman of the committee preparing the NAS report, says the committee rejected the idea of a single "AIDS czar", or of a separate agency to deal with AIDS, fearing that programmes already under way would be disrupted.

NAS's most urgent call is for a stronger approach to intravenous drug users, the population in which the virus causing AIDS is now spreading the most rapidly. The report points to the "gross inadequacy" of educational campaigns directed towards drug users, and the need for targeted educational programmes for black and Hispanic communities. The Academy condemns the inadequacy of drug treatment programmes and the dearth of facilities, and commends the evaluation of tactics such as handing out clean needles.

Other NAS proposals include the definition of HIV infection as a disease,

in recognition that the stages of disease progression are a continuum; the establishment of a federal law to prohibit discrimination against people who test positive for infection; the foundation of a federal grant system to assist the states in financing health care for people with AIDS; and the removal of bans that prohibit the US Centers for Disease Control, as a government agency, from placing paid advertisements for AIDS education.

The NAS committee predicts that its 1986 estimate of \$1,000 million a year for spending on AIDS education and health care will be too low by 1990, but recommends that proposals to spend more on research than \$1,000 million should be balanced against other research priorities.

The draft report released last week by the Presidential Commission on the HIV Epidemic goes way beyond the recommendations contained in its preliminary report, released in February (see *Nature* 332, 3; 1988). The 269 pages contain 579 recommendations based on the testimony of over 570 witnesses from government, the health-care industry, homosexual groups and academic institutions.

Contrary to predictions at its formation that the commission would toe the political line established by President Reagan, its report comes out against the mandatory testing of prisoners and immigrants, and suggests legislation to ban discrimination based on infection with HIV.

Like the NAS report, the commission's report calls for strong laws to protect the confidentiality of HIV test results, but recommends that the confidentiality rules be breached to notify the sexual partners of infected persons, health-care workers accidentally exposed to blood and state epidemiological authorities.

But the commission would also make it a criminal offence knowingly to transmit the virus, establish educational programmes in the schools at all ages and create a state funding pool to insure medically uninsurable people. The broad recommendations would cost more than \$3,000 million a year extra for AIDS by 1990, according to the commission's chairman, retired Admiral James D. Watkins.

Reflecting the outspoken qualities attributed to Watkins over the past several months, the commission's report contains a final chapter written by Watkins himself which is likely to draw opposition from the more conservative commissioners, who will comment on the draft this week.

Watkins proposes that Congress should give the office of the US Surgeon General increased powers to act independently to avert a public health crisis once it has been identified by the President. The Surgeon General would construct plans and budgets to counter emergencies in consultation with pertinent agencies.

The high cost and drastic nature of the changes in the US management of the AIDS epidemic recommended by the NAS and the Presidential Commission inevitably mean that many of them will never happen. But Congress and the US Public Health Service (PHS) are both working to bring AIDS policy around.

A bill sponsored by Representative Henry Waxman (Democrat, California) which provides confidentiality and anti-discrimination protection to those infected will be considered in the House of Representatives this week. The PHS has just ended a week-long closed retreat involving its top AIDS officials to determine a future action plan. The officials compiled revised estimates of the incidence of AIDS, predicting 450,000 cases by 1993. Their plans for dealing with this staggering number will be released at the end of this month.

Carol Ezzell

## New research centres

THE National Science Foundation has announced a \$2.2-million grant to establish one of three Biological Research Centers at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. The award, the largest of three, will support a new Institute for Biophysical Research on Macromolecular Assemblies to examine how assemblies of macromolecules — such as DNA, RNA and complex proteins — work together in the living cell.

To this end, the university has announced four major research thrusts: the regulatory interactions and structures in protein-DNA systems; protein stability and folding; molecular mechanics of the cytoskeleton, and structure and function of proton-translocating ATPases.

The University of California, Berkeley, will receive a \$2-million, five-year grant to set up a centre for plant developmental biology. Director Michael Freeling says the money will be used to equip a cell biology laboratory, the centrepiece of which will be a state-of-the-art confocal microscope.

The facility will provide a "repository of cell biological techniques", says Freeling, with two full-time cell biologists to maintain the laboratory, develop new methods and teach techniques to researchers. Their assistance is needed, he said, as faculty members trained in molecular biology are being drawn by their research into the realm of cell biology.

The third centre will be at the University of Arizona in Tucson, for insect biology research.

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