

Privatization not the answer to NIH problems

■ High ratings for NIH research

■ Administrative, salary problems remain

Washington

THE controversial suggestion that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) research facility in Bethesda, Maryland, would be better off managed by a private enterprise is not justified, but some changes "are absolutely necessary if the program is to continue to be an important component of the nation's biomedical research effort". That is the conclusion of an Institute of Medicine (IOM) report* released this week that looked at a potential cure for some of the ills — real or imagined — that are plaguing NIH.

Although the White House Office of Management and Budget, where the idea first originated, quickly denied it was proposing selling off "a jewel in the crown", it nonetheless was anxious that the idea be given serious thought. The principal White House concern was that, given government wage limitations, NIH could not hope to retain top researchers. There had been reports in 1987 that AIDS researcher Robert Gallo was being wooed away from NIH by a private university.

But according to the IOM report, the intramural programme will not easily be privatized. NIH's Bethesda activities would not generate enough revenue from user fees or sales of services to support their research activities. Moreover, cutting the intramural programme off from the grant-giving extramural activities could destroy a unique element of the NIH research enterprise.

But the report is clear that there are serious problems confronting the intramural programme. Some 13,000 full-time employees work at the Bethesda research campus, as well as approximately 2,000 visiting researchers. The programme has an annual budget of around \$700 million, a little more than 10 per cent of the total for all NIH activities. Although salaries for junior researchers on average compare favourably with university and private industry, top researchers with either MDs or PhDs earn substantially less than their colleagues outside government. Top salaries rarely exceed \$100,000, often a starting point for industry or large university medical schools.

NIH also face other nagging problems. There is a widespread perception that the quality of junior scientists at NIH is slipping, perhaps because of competing offers from private industry. Government retirement programmes are incompatible with those outside government, making it hard

to recruit senior people. Research space is at a premium, and Congress has been reluctant to authorize new construction. International travel is controlled by the Department of Health and Human Services, the cabinet agency responsible for NIH, and NIH scientists generally believe their work is hampered by department restrictions.

Despite these problems, the IOM report judges that the intramural programme is still producing high quality research. A bibliometric analysis shows that in the period 1981 to 1984 more than one-fifth of the 10 most highly cited research papers were by NIH scientists. (NIH rank slightly below the Scripps Clinic and Research Foundations, and more substantially below Rockefeller University, in average number of citations, but such comparisons must be treated with caution.) There are also four Nobel laureates at NIH, as well as more than a dozen Lasker Prize winners and some 60 members of the National Academy of Scientists.

Having concluded that NIH is better served by remaining part of the government, the IOM report considers several options for improving the current situation. The report encourages the creation of a personnel demonstration project that would permit more flexible hiring and pay practices, and remove federal pay ceilings where justifiable. The report also encourages Congress to permit the creation of ten endowed chairs to attract or retain top scientists. Administrative problems can be ameliorated by giving the director of NIH greater autonomy for administrative decisions. Many of these decisions are at present subject to review from the Assistant Secretary for Health.

Other suggestions are to create a special director's discretionary fund of at least \$25 million to take advantage of unique research opportunities. External reviews conducted every four years of intramural programmes would help assure high research standards. Creating an NIH scholars programme for outstanding young investigators appointed on a competitive basis to non-tenured positions would help to attract a new cadre of scientists to NIH.

The IOM committee that wrote the report was chaired by Harold Shapiro, president of Princeton University.

Joseph Palca

* A healthy NIH intramural program: structural change or administrative remedies. National Academy Press, Washington DC, 1988.

Fang stays home

London

PROFESSOR Fang Li Zhi, the malcontent Chinese astronomer who was fired from his academic post three years ago, has now been prevented by the government of China from taking up an invitation to the United States.

Several colleagues in the West have written to *Nature* to protest at what appears to have been a sudden revocation of Fang's permission to travel abroad. As recently as October, he was in Australia for an international conference.

Fang's would-be hosts in the United States believe that the revocation of his permission to visit them stems from an interview with the Chinese press some weeks ago in which Fang, then in Hong Kong, offered the opinion that speech is less than free in mainland China.

Among those who have signed the letter of protest are John N. Bahcall (Princeton), George R. Blumenthal (Santa Cruz), George B. Field (Harvard), Riccardo Giacconi (Space Telescope Science Institute), Peter Goldreich (Caltech), Douglas N.C. Lin (Santa Cruz), Richard McCray (Colorado), Christopher McKee (Berkeley), Frank Shu (Berkeley), Harlan J. Smith (McDonald Observatory) and David N. Schramm (Chicago). □

Britain in Europe

London

LAST week saw the resolution of two separate conflicts between Britain and its European partners in collaborative research projects. Britain's science minister, Robert Jackson, said that Britain would remain a member of CERN, the European laboratory for particle physics near Geneva, having won substantial reductions in its future subscription. A change in the method of calculating subscriptions will mean that Britain's fee is no longer increased out of proportion by currency fluctuations. The new method will come into effect in 1990.

But Jackson said that Britain would be keeping up the pressure on CERN to improve management efficiency, reduce staff and to increase investment by non-member states, with a view to reducing the subscriptions of members. Britain's contribution will be reduced from £54 million this year to £47 million next year; Britain hopes to reduce that figure to £40 million in subsequent years.

Britain also finally agreed last week to the 5 per cent increase in the science budget of the European Space Agency, but only on condition that an independent review of the programme is carried out. This secures the immediate future of the Horizon 2000 programme which had been in doubt because of the British veto on increased support.

Christine McGourty