'Mind body' claims put NIH on defensive

[WASHINGTON] The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) has been forced to defend its peer-review system in Congress against charges of bias against 'mind body medicine'. At the same time last week, it was hosting a conference that declared acupuncture a *bona fide* treatment for some kinds of nausea and pain, sparking criticism from scientific sceptics.

The charges about 'mind body medicine' — the theory that emotions are critical to human health and disease — and the questioning of the NIH's commitment to it, were made at a congressional briefing convened by Representative John Porter (Republican, Illinois), who holds key legislative responsibility for NIH's budget.

Porter argued at the briefing that traditional medicine "has seemed to have left out some very efficacious approaches". He added later that the NIH had to "give some real guidance to the American people" about what alternative treatments were safe and efficacious. He said: "I don't think [it is] doing that sufficiently."

The main target of criticism at the briefing was Steven Hyman, director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), who was assailed by supporters of 'mind body medicine' for what they described as an inveterate bias against their approach by NIH and its reviewers.

"The NIH has dug in its heels and hardened its position against mind body medicine," said Candace Pert of Georgetown University in Washington DC, a pharmacologist who discovered opiate receptors. But, she said, "people want it, it works, and it really does have scientific rationale".

James Gordon, director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine at Georgetown, argued that there is a bias built into peer-review committees. He claimed that thousands of carefully controlled studies are published in peer-reviewed journals on many alternative therapies, but NIH peer reviewers are ignorant of them.

Hyman said review panels are groups of human beings and it is impossible to free them from all bias. But he could think of no better way of producing valid, objective results and therapies "than subjecting our proposals to do research to a community of peers in the marketplace of ideas". He told the briefing: "There have to be appropriate standards of evidence."

Although Porter, who chairs the House of Representatives spending subcommittee that funds NIH, does not have authority to write laws directing NIH to pay more attention to how the mind influences disease and health, he suggested that other committees with jurisdiction should take up the issue.

In addition to a "major" role in the area

for NIMH, Congress should question whether the Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM) and the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research "are really fulfilling the expectations that Congress had" for them in this area, he said.

Porter said he was drawn to the issue in part because this summer he defied the recommendations of three surgeons that he have an operation for a slipped intervertebral disc. A month of rest and relaxation cured him, he says, and provoked his interest in the power of the mind to heal.

Meanwhile, an independent panel convened by the NIH in Bethesda, Maryland, declared at the end of a three-day 'consensus conference' that it had found "clear evidence" that acupuncture works for post-operative dental pain and for nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy, after surgery and probably during pregnancy.

The findings of the 12-member panel were immediately criticized by sceptics who claimed that the panel was "fixed" against

critics of acupuncture. "It was a conference of believers [who] recited their delusions as facts," said Victor Herbert, a professor of medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, who dismisses acupuncture as "pseudo-religious cultism".

But the organizers of the conference, cosponsored by OAM and the Office of Medical Applications of Research, vigorously defended the panel and the process as fair.

Its conclusions were based largely on a three-month review of the available literature, which was judged by the "highest standards", said David Ramsay, the panel chair and president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore, and a former editor of the *American Journal of Physiology*. He said: "We did find positive evidence for the efficacy of acupuncture in certain conditions."

Alan Trachtenberg, a physician at NIH who chaired the conference planning committee, strongly denied any bias in the selection of 25 people to present data to the panel.

Meredith Wadman

India drafts law to protect bioresources

[NEW DELHI] The Indian government is planning tough legislation that will severely restrict access by foreign researchers and pharmaceutical companies to the country's biological resources.

Under the legislation, to be introduced in parliament next month, Indian scientists who transfer commercially valuable research results to foreign nationals without official approval will be punished.

The draft legislation has been drawn up by an expert committee headed by the eminent agricultural scientist M. S. Swaminathan, who says that India's main concern is to protect its biological resources from being exploited by foreigners without sharing the benefits with local people.

All political parties have welcomed the move to protect India's bioresources through the legislation, which has been worked on since India became a party to the 1993 Convention on Biological Diversity, which enables countries to safeguard their rights over their biological diversity.

Suman Sahai, a member of the expert committee and president of Gene Campaign, a nongovernmental organization, says the law will give India a legal basis on which to deal with the theft of genetic resources. "Right now, our biological resources are being plundered," she says.

The government is to set up a National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) to implement the law. It is to be headed by an eminent scientist, and will include representatives from the departments of environment,

agriculture, biotechnology and ocean development, as well as five people from outside the government. State governments will set up their own biodiversity boards.

Under the legislation, a non-Indian will be prohibited from "obtaining any biological resources for research or commercial utilization or collecting samples or undertaking any activity in the nature of bioprospecting without previous approval of the NBA". The law will make it illegal for an Indian citizen to transfer "the results of any research with respect to any biological resource for monetary consideration to any person who is not a citizen of India without NBA approval". Violators will face a five-year jail term and a fine of US\$30,000.

But the law will allow the transfer of biological resources to institutions abroad under government-sponsored collaborative research projects "subject to overall policy guidelines of central government". All agreements entered into before the act is passed "will be reviewed to bring them in conformity with the policy guidelines".

A key provision of the legislation is that no-one will be able to apply for a patent based on research or information gathered from any Indian biological resource without informing the NBA. Before giving permission for patenting, the authority will impose a benefit-sharing fee or royalty which will be credited to a biological diversity fund to be used to develop the communities which helped to conserve the biological resources.

K. S. Jayaraman