Top US panel will map out fresh attack on AIDS

Washington. Donna Shalala, the US Secretary of Health, is to set up a National Task Force on AIDS Drug Development in an attempt to revive waning hopes that a cure can be found for the disease.

According to a statement due to be issued in Washington this week by the Department of Health and Human Services, the 15-strong panel will be chaired by Shalala's assistant secretary, Philip Lee, and charged with "seeking new and innovative approaches to the development of AIDS drugs". It will concentrate on identifying and removing obstacles in the path of drug researchers, the department says.

In announcing the initiative at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on Tuesday, Shalala was expected to stress the need for new and innovative approaches to the development of drug treatments for HIV and AIDS. At present, officials say, there are no new drug applications for antiretroviral drugs being considered by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Shalala is inviting nominations for panel members. But membership is likely to include most of the prominent people due to accompany her at the announcement, namely White House AIDS coordinator Kristine Gebbie; Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID); Harold Varmus of NIH; David Kessler of the FDA; Roy Vagelos, chairman of the drug company Merck; and Moises Agosto of the National Minority AIDS Council.

The idea of the task force came largely from Kessler. "This is trying to look at the entire continuum, from basic science through to clinical treatment," says Jim O'Hara, an FDA spokesman. "The panel will try to look at this in a seamless fashion, and see where the potholes are on a track."

But the initiative will also be seen as a political response by the Clinton administration to growing disenchantment and despair over the prospects for treating AIDS, particularly in the wake of preliminary results of the Anglo-French Concorde trial earlier this year, which showed that AZT does not prolong patient life.

AIDS activists and researchers had not been informed of the details of the plan as *Nature* went to press. But the initiative is likely to be welcomed as an attempt to address directly the central issue of finding an AIDS cure. "It sounds like they are all trying to put their heads together", says Gary Bonasorte of the Community Research Initiative on AIDS in New York, which has been trying out innovative approaches to HIV treatment. "It's about time."

Colin Macilwain

NSF chief urges support in selling science to the public

Washington. The ending of the Cold War makes it more important than ever for scientists to explain why public support for their work is necessary, according to Neal Lane, the new director of the US National Science Foundation (NSF). But he also warns that congressional pressure to shift resources from basic to strategic science means there is unlikely to be any growth in funding for areas such as astrophysics and astronomy in the near future.

Scientists should do more to sell themselves to the public, to ensure that science retains both public support and the funding that goes with it, Lane said in an interview last week. "We have to do it, as an agency justifying our budget," he says.

"But the wider community of scientists and engineers can help. They have an opportunity to take this question seriously, and to provide the best possible answers." Lane was confirmed in October as director of the NSF, the \$3-billion agency that funds most US university research in the physical sciences, as well as projects in biology, social sciences and education. One of his first tasks has been to oversee the NSF's response, due in January, to sharp criticisms made recently by the Senate appropriations subcommittee responsible for approving the foundation's budget.

The subcommittee is threatening to divert money to other agencies if the foundation does not pay more attention to applied research. It told the NSF to spend at least 60 per cent of its money on so-called 'strategic' research, and explicitly warned it "not to shroud curiosity-driven activities under the rubric of strategic activities".

"My reading of the report is that the committee feels the NSF has not been as responsive as it would like in explaining what we were doing, and in setting priorities," says Lane. "The committee wants the NSF to take more seriously our responsibility in helping the nation with some of the very serious problems that our people face."

Lane says that the Senate is also asking the foundation to be more precise in how it defines strategic research. He cites his own field of atomic molecular optical science as one example of work of a fundamental nature which can still qualify as 'strategic' because it matches the mission of a government agency.

Neal Lane: confident of making an impact.

"We have no intention of stopping funding areas of research like astronomy, astrophysics, cosmology or pure mathematics," Lane says. "Certainly we expect to support healthy programmes in all of those areas." But pressed on the prospects of growth in such fields, Lane strikes a cautious note. "Our country has financial problems which do not imply huge budget growth. So priorities need to be set on how money should be spent," he says.

Lane accepts that the NSF needs to redefine its mission in the wake of the Cold War. Military requirements were only one element of the thinking behind the creation of the agency in 1948, he says. "But the world has changed in such a substantial way that it is important for the question [about its mission] to be asked, and for us to explain why our work is so critically important to the country."

To help to do this, individual scientists and engineers must "reach out into their community", says Lane. "Many are already doing that, but some don't, because it's not quite clear how to get started," he says. Lane promises that the NSF will coordinate attempts to get scientists out into factories, offices and schools.

"Every high technology business in the country is doing what it is doing based on knowledge that came out of scientific research, funded largely by the government," says Lane, who appears comfortable justifying the NSF budget on the basis of industrial competitiveness. Economies such as Japan which historically relied less on pure scientific research "now recognize the importance of basic research, and of having it in their own country," he says.

Lane, who was formerly provost of Rice University in Texas, says he is confident of making an impact as director "because this agency has such a track record of success that it is possible for one person to come in, provide a focus, and enable it to pull together its collective energies".

He claims that the Clinton administration's commitment to science and technology is exemplified by its treatment in the recently completed budget round, which he describes as "really quite good". Lane adds: "I think you'll continue to see that unfold in the coming months and years."

And Lane says he is "very positive" about NSF's move away from its old headquarters, a stone's throw from the White House, to Arlington, in Virginia. "This building has been home to the NSF for a long time, so people understandably have strong feelings about it," he says. "But I don't feel that physics or the NSF are being downgraded by the move." **Colin Macilwain**