

Medical lobby seeks cuts in US health research agency

Washington. Uncertainty is hanging over the future of a US health research agency responsible for improving the quality and efficiency of health care in the United States, as Republicans in both houses of Congress seek major cuts in its budget.

Officials at the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR), best known for its development of clinical practice guidelines, fear that delays in approving the health-funding bill in the Senate will give a little-known doctors' group, offended by the agency's conclusions about excessive surgery and other issues, more time to persuade senators to inflict deep cuts on the agency.

The House of Representatives has already passed the bill, which funds the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, with an amendment by Sam Johnson (Republican, Texas) providing just \$66 million for the agency in the fiscal year which officially started this week — less than half its current \$159 million annual budget.

The Senate bill, currently deadlocked over cuts in social programmes (see *Nature* 377, 187; 1995), would give NIH an overall increase of 2.7 per cent over this year's level. The AHCPR would have its funds cut to just \$127 million. "High quality, comprehensive research cannot absorb a reduction of this magnitude and still yield valid scientific results," says Clifton Gaus, administrator of the agency, which has already cut its non-university research grants by 35 per cent.

The AHCPR carries out research aimed at improving the quality of health care, with an emphasis on women, minorities and rural health. "There are going to be economic winners and losers when you do this type of research," says Robert Griffin, a spokesman for the agency. Two years ago, for example, cataract surgeons were angered by the agency's conclusion that surgery was not always the best treatment for cataracts.

The winners include advocates of those infected with HIV, who have referred to

AHCPR's data when defending AIDS service programmes from cuts. The AIDS Action Council, for example, which promotes AIDS research and services, plans to arm itself with research supported by AHCPR and published last month that shows no relation between injection-drug use and the progression of HIV.

The AHCPR's recent troubles began after it released practice guidelines last year on lower-back pain, claiming surgery was unnecessary in most cases in which the pain lasts less than three months. Neil Kahanovitz, a Virginia spinal surgeon affiliated to the North American Spine Association, a group of spine surgeons, subsequently formed a group to lobby Johnson and other House legislators to persuade them to support a cut in the agency's funding.

"It's not the content of the guidelines he dislikes, it's that so many other agencies are doing the same work," Dayna Cade, spokeswoman for the lobbying group said. But Cade's defence rings hollow, as no other government agency has a mission similar to that of AHCPR, formed in 1989 to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of care.

Most medical groups, including the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, have supported AHCPR's work. But Johnson sides with the Center for Patient Advocacy, in which a number of spine surgeons from Texas are active. "We don't need, nor can we afford, the AHCPR," Johnson said when arguing for his amendment. An aide explains that Johnson has proposed cuts to the agency's budget because of his own concerns and those of health providers, including Kahanovitz.

The AHCPR has now embarked on its own promotional effort. "Just as the NIH is shaping the future of medicine by mapping human genes, AHCPR is providing the road map to guide the public and private sector in their quest to lower costs without hurting the quality of health care," says Gaus.

Adrienne Appel

OECD extends 'megascience' clearing house

Paris. The so-called 'megascience' forum, a body set up in 1992 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as a clearing house for information on big science projects, has had its mandate renewed for a further three years.

The decision was taken at a meeting in Paris last week of the OECD's high-level Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy. The forum has produced reviews of large projects in astronomy, deep Earth drilling, global change, oceanography, and neutron and synchrotron radiation sources.

The meeting also agreed that the forum should be given responsibility for monitoring and catalysing international scientific collaboration. In particular, it will be allowed to set up working groups to explore new areas for cooperation, made up of government officials and scientists.

Peter Tindemans, the chairman of the forum, says the new arrangement will give it "greater political clout", and extend its remit beyond big science projects to include cooperation in general — for example, in environmental research.

Declan Butler

Science stars fail to shine in challenge from student team

London. Britain may need to re-evaluate its concept of scientific literacy following an embarrassing defeat by a team of students of a Royal Society panel led by Lewis Wolpert, professor of biology at University College, London, and chairman of its committee on the public understanding of science, in a mock round of the television quiz show 'University Challenge'.

The Royal Society team also included the government's chief scientific adviser, Robert May, and Sir Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal, who is this year's president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. It had challenged the current University Challenge champions, Trinity College, Cambridge, to a general knowledge quiz chaired by the show's regular host, Jeremy Paxman. The quiz was held last week in the society's newly refurbished Wellcome Trust lecture hall.

In addition to being comprehensively beaten — with a final score of 210 points to 120 — the Royal Society fellows appeared to suffer an attack of collective amnesia when attempting to answer questions not merely on science, geography and current affairs but also on the history of the society itself.

Rees later put the defeat down to "slow reaction times, and slow recall from our store of knowledge". But even this failed to explain why, during the part of the quiz when team members are allowed to confer before giving an answer, the Royal Society fellows were unable to reply even to straightforward questions from their own areas of education and experience.

Wolpert, who introduced himself as coming from South Africa, failed to recognize a prominent Pretoria monument. And May, who hails from Australia, needed reminding that Perth is the only Australian state capital not to be named after a person.

Despite much support from members of the audience, who whispered answers loudly from the floor and burst into applause whenever the home team answered correctly, the team was unable to name either where the society's first meeting took place, or the device — a magnetron — that generates microwaves in a microwave oven.

At the end of the contest, Paxman remarked that the result showed that C. P. Snow's concept of science and the arts as representing 'two cultures' appeared to be alive and well.

Others suggested that the Royal Society's fellows had not been particularly looking forward to the contest. When news of the impending challenge became known, they "did not exactly queue up to be part of the team", according to one observer.

Ehsan Masood