

# Advisors may urge NIH to seek out industry support for clinical trials

**Washington.** A panel of advisors to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is expected to recommend that the NIH should investigate ways of obtaining financial and other support from the medical insurance and pharmaceutical industries for its clinical studies, in a bid to counter the escalating cost of such research.

The NIH's \$1.7-billion clinical research programme has been under review since July by the Panel on Clinical Research, whose 15 members include administrators of leading research institutions and senior industry officials, and which reports to Harold Varmus, the director of NIH.

Its full report is not due until next year. But at a meeting of the panel in Bethesda, Maryland, last week, members revealed that they are studying a number of ways in which the private sector could "partner" the NIH in its support of clinical research.

The panel's chairman, David Nathan, president of the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, said he wants the group to recommend that medical insurance and drug companies contribute an annual amount to NIH towards the cost of large clinical trials, from which they often benefit.

"The taxpayer should not be paying the

cost alone," Nathan said. But he emphasized that, even if industry did contribute, it would not decide what research was carried out; indeed, Nathan said any one company might or might not benefit from such research in any particular year, just as certain taxpayers gain from federally funded research conducted in one year and not another.

He added that conflicts of interest would be largely avoided because the grant from industry would be administered by the NIH, and that the trials would, as at present, be carried out by independent investigators.

Nathan said that the NIH has reached a point at which it either has to reduce the number of clinical trials it funds or to raise outside contributions to the costs of the trials. Any extra money received from industry would release funds for spending on areas of clinical research in which "we have to beg for money now", Nathan added.

It remains to be seen how many of the other panel members will eventually back this approach. But there is already caution from one representative of the pharmaceutical industry. Leon Rosenberg, a member of the NIH advisory panel who is president of the Pharmaceutical Research Institute of Bristol-Myers Squibb, said the idea "that a

bunch of pharmaceutical companies would bond together to supplement an NIH appropriation is not very likely to come to pass". (The Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association says it does not want to comment before it has been able to study detailed proposals.)

Rosenberg did say that drug companies should become more involved in training young clinical researchers, who would benefit from seeing "ideas get converted into drugs or devices that help the public". He also suggested that this might avoid potential conflicts of interest. "I can't imagine a postdoc in oncology would find a conflict in learning about study design and data management at Bristol-Myers," he said.

Others panel members expressed worries over the conflict-of-interest implications of Nathan's suggestion. And there is likely to be similar concern in Congress. Chris Shays (Republican, Connecticut), for example, chair of a House of Representative subcommittee with some oversight responsibility for the NIH, says he can see the value of asking industry to help cover the costs of clinical trials. But he is concerned that conflicts of interest might arise from attempts by industry to exert influence on research they are asked to support. "The studies must be independent," he says.

The panel also discussed whether industry should be involved in NIH's 75 General Clinical Research Centers, run jointly by NIH and academic institutions under a programme that provides clinical research facilities and personnel to scientists without other support. Nathan pointed out a possible model in a thriving venture between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Beth Israel Hospital and the drug company Pfizer.

But some panel members believe that, if industry is to become a major funder of NIH research, it will be necessary to ensure that universities, which at present rely on drug companies for a substantial amount of support, are not left out.

The major question remains whether corporations will be willing to contribute. "Will directors feel they can give lower dividends to stockholders in exchange for research which may benefit them in the long term?" asked Nathan. He made clear his own view that the stockholders would benefit from such investment.

Other issues being considered by the panel include whether NIH's clinical research programme should pay physicians more, the impact of the growth of managed care, with its emphasis on cost-cutting, and whether the United States is training enough clinical researchers. **Adrienne Appel**

## Hubble reveals glory of Eagle's 'EGGs'

London. **The orbiting Hubble Space Telescope (HST) has recorded the birth of new stars in the Eagle nebula, 7,000 light-years from Earth in the Serpens constellation. The towering dark structure in the picture (right) is a column of cool molecular hydrogen and dust that acts as an incubator for the infant stars. The gas is slowly eroded by ultraviolet photoevaporation from nearby hot stars to uncover small globules of a dense gas. These evaporating gaseous globules have come to be known colloquially as 'EGGs'.**

**The shadows of the 'EGGs' protect gas behind them, resulting in the projections at the top of the cloud. Forming inside at least some of the 'EGGs' are embryonic stars — which abruptly stop growing when the 'EGGs' are uncovered and separated from the larger reservoir of gas from which they were drawing mass.**

**The picture, taken with the HST's**

IMAGE  
UNAVAILABLE  
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REASONS

**Wide Field and Planetary Camera 2, was constructed from three separate images representing emission from different types of atoms. The red regions of the picture show emission from singly ionized sulphur atoms. Green indicates emission from hydrogen and blue shows light emitted by doubly ionized oxygen atoms.** □

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