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Wreck preservation project makes a splash

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Celera affirms focus on drug discovery in wake of Venter's exit

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Side-effects bring trial for Alzheimer's drug to a standstill

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NASA balloon undergoes record-breaking flight

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Bush's budget boost puts NIH on target for doubled figures

Erika Check, Washington

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is set to complete a five-year spurt of growth next year, with its funding rising to an eye-popping $27.3 billion in the fiscal year 2003.

US health secretary Tommy Thompson announced on 26 January that President George W. Bush will request a $3.7-billion increase for the biomedical research agency in his 4 February budget proposal. This would fulfil a drive initiated in Congress — and endorsed by Bush in his election campaign — to double in five years the NIH budget from its 1998 level of $13.6 billion.

The drive has been led by patient advocacy groups, science lobby groups including Research!America, and legislators such as John Porter, the former chair of the House appropriations subcommittee in charge of health spending, who retired from Congress in 2000. The success of the effort has been watched enviously by scientists in other disciplines and in other countries.

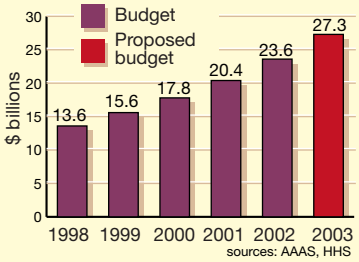
Congress is widely expected to approve the president's request when it completes the 2003 budget this summer. Bush is asking for $5.5 billion next year for cancer research, up from $4.9 billion this year; and $1.5 billion for research related to bioterrorism — five times this year's expenditure. Most of the new bioterrorism money will go to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). Rumours that NIAID director Anthony Fauci is about to be appointed to the vacant directorship of the NIH reached a new intensity ahead of Bush's State of the Union address to Congress on 29 January.

Fauci would not comment on the rumours, but says that his institute would spend the bioterrorism money on basic research, drug and vaccine discovery, clinical research and construction of new facilities.

With two-fifths of the new money going to the NIAID, Bush's proposal will see the other 26 NIH institutes enjoying somewhat smaller increases than in recent years. But Fauci pledges that the expansion of bioterrorism funds would also boost research on diseases such as cancer, malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS.

Jordan Cohen, president of the Association of American Medical Colleges, welcomes the funding announcement. Looking ahead, he says: "It's probably not reasonable to expect funding to grow at exactly the same rate it has, but meeting the scientific opportunities that exist is going to require continued investment."

April Burke of Lewis-Burke Associates, a lobbying group that works with universities and research organizations, says: "There's a lot of money going to cancer and bioterrorism, but the important thing is that the administration is supporting the overall increase of the NIH, and that's excellent." ■



On the rise: the past five years have seen funding flood into the National Institutes of Health.

Physicists head for collision course

Geoff Brumfiel, Washington

The construction of a linear electron–positron collider should be the top priority for high-energy physics over the next 20 years, an advisory panel has told the US government.

The panel, a sub-group of the High Energy Physics Advisory Panel that is chaired by Jon Bagger of Johns Hopkins University, also recommends that the United States should seek to host the collider.

But if it is built, the machine will cost between $5 billion and $7 billion, and will require strong collaboration between physicists in Japan, the United States and Europe. It remains unclear what form that collaboration will take.

So far, regional groups of physicists have done most of the conceptual design work on the collider, and Bagger says that an international organization is needed "almost immediately" to improve the way these efforts are coordinated.

"The international community has to get its act together," agrees Albrecht Wagner, director of DESY, Germany's high-energy physics research centre in Hamburg. He adds that any collaboration will face tough choices about where to build the machine and which technologies to use.

US high-energy physicists acknowledge that they face an uphill struggle in convincing the Department of Energy and the National Science Foundation, the agencies that support their discipline, to back the project. But Bagger is hopeful. "A 10–30% increase in our budget would do the job," he says. "That's not unreasonable to contemplate." ■

SLAC

A klystron such as this would accelerate high-energy microwaves for the planned linear collider.