

'Bypass' budget reveals AIDS research funding priorities

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) Revitalization Act, passed by the United States Congress in 1993, not only established an Office of AIDS Research (OAR) at NIH, but also gave the new office the power to plan the budget for the entire NIH HIV/AIDS-related research programme.

However, the legislation also required OAR to prepare two budgets, one to include with the entire NIH budget and subject to the usual labyrinthian approval process, and a second, 'bypass' budget, to be submitted ultimately to the House Appropriations/Health and Human Services (HHS) Subcommittee without going through the HHS hierarchy first. Although some may view the bypass budget as mere window-dressing, its preparers argue that it represents the real opportunities now available in HIV/AIDS-related research, identified by OAR staff in collaboration with many non-NIH HIV/AIDS experts.

The director of OAR, William E. Paul, says that "this is the first budget we

[OAR] have been responsible for from the beginning of the budget process." Paul took over as the first OAR director in February of 1994, moving from NIH's National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases. He emphasizes that the money sought in the bypass budget, a total of \$1.7 billion to be divided across eight 'areas of emphasis', is "what we could spend wisely now, without any waste." The bypass budget represents a 23 per cent increase over the estimated NIH HIV/AIDS budget for fiscal year 1995. It is also 22 per cent more than the 'other' budget prepared by OAR, which is included in President Clinton's budget request for FY 1996.

Given the current barrage of proposals on Capitol Hill seeking to limit or even cut the overall NIH budget, it is unlikely that OAR's bypass budget will be fully funded. But, because it identifies areas of research needing increased attention, it fulfills the legal demands imposed by the NIH Revitalization Act.

FINTAN R. STEELE

Exploit, don't compromise, research

A grand coalition of British academics is fighting back against what they see as a threat to their intellectual freedom, namely increasing pressure from the UK government and industry to direct research into commercially productive areas. This, they say, is undermining the ability of universities to carry out basic research and of academics to publish results, according to a recent report* from the National Academies Policy Advisory Group.

Entitled *Intellectual Property and the Academic Community*, the report states: "Although the distinction between pure and applied has become much less sharp, most university scientists are still deeply involved in academic science. This is undertaken in an international arena which has little to do with the extraction of commercial value from research." For this reason, the advisory group recommends that the acquisition of intellectual property rights should not be treated as an independent measure of academic achievement, and that government support for basic research should remain a priority.

Moreover, the advisory group states that the European (first-to-file) patent system is in direct conflict with the academic norm of full and prompt publication because it does not allow researchers to publish results if they intend to apply for a patent. There must be a compromise between the traditions of scientific research and turning results into applications, said Sir Michael Atiyah, President of the Royal Society, in the report. "The need for this accommodation is greater in those fields where the gap between basic and applied research has ceased to be perceptible . . . above all in medical research," he wrote.

However, the group is not in favour of adopting the US patent system, where patents are granted on a first-to-invent basis, and where researchers are given a 12 month grace period in which to publish their inventions. Instead, the group urges universities to expedite their own patent filing procedures

NUALA MORAN
London

* *Intellectual Property and the Academic Community*: available from the Royal Society, London, UK (tel. +44-171-839-5561).

Office of AIDS Research FY1996 'bypass' budget compared with 1994 and 1995 NIH AIDS budgets (in thousands US\$)

