4 September 1959, Volume 130, Number 3375

SCIENCE

SCIENCE, which is now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at Business Press, Lancaster, Pa. The joint journal is published in the SCIENCE format. Entered at the Lancaster, Pa., Post Office as second class matter under the Act of 3 March 1879. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial and personnel-placement correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by contributors. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, book reviews, and illustrations, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

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Annual subscriptions: $8.50, foreign postage, $1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

Money Still Isn't Everything

Each year at this time Congress takes the bit in its teeth and raises by a substantial amount an Administration request for appropriations for scientific research. The funds are for the National Institutes of Health at Bethesda, Maryland, and this year the increase was from $294 million to $400 million—36 percent. More money for research should be given a hearty welcome, but some scientists regard this increase a bit wryly. Why so? Part of the answer is that it may not be possible to spend so much money so quickly without significantly lowering present research standards. President Eisenhower made this point when with some reluctance he signed the bill. But part of the answer also lies in the manner in which differences of opinion among scientists about the best way to conduct research are now resolved.

To give an example of a difference of opinion among scientists: although everyone agrees that it would be splendid if science found a cure for cancer, the problem is how should science proceed? Some investigators see great hope in testing one chemical compound after another for its effects on tumors and healthy tissue. There is a reasonable chance, these investigators believe, that a screening program will lead to the discovery of drugs that will significantly retard, cure, or prevent various kinds of cancer. Such a program requires an organized effort, a large budget, and a great number of scientists, all capable of identifying a significant effect when they see one.

Attempting to take the citadel by storm has been a respectable procedure since at least the time of Paul Ehrlich's 606 trys at finding a cure for syphilis. But other investigators hold that, although it is fine for some workers to screen compounds for possible effects on tumors, *they* have no wish to do so. In fact, these other investigators do not even set their sights on anything so specific as a cure for cancer. They are interested in seeking better understanding of how cells function. Of course, with increased understanding of how cells function may come increased understanding of what causes cancer and, consequently, of how to cure it.

The manner in which such differences of opinion are resolved explains why some scientists regard the yearly increase in appropriations with mixed emotions. The differences are resolved in good part by Congress, which has its own ideas about priorities in research. In making up the money bill, the legislators indicate in considerable detail just how the funds they appropriate should be spent. Many observers on one hand will laud the support Congress has given the chemotherapy program of the National Cancer Institute, but on the other hand will find that fundamental studies are being shortchanged. In arriving at its decisions, Congress has the benefit of testimony by many scientists, some of whom are of the first rank, but something goes wrong when Congress then proceeds to pinpoint research targets for the scientific community. Certain programs by their very nature are going to have greater appeal for the legislators and their constituents than other programs.

Congress seems right in saying, through its yearly appropriation increases, that an expanding program of medical research should be a part of national policy. But to achieve good results, an expanding program requires a long-range plan, a proper balance between various kinds of research, and not too many detailed directives. Much would be gained if the Administration took the initiative in preparing such a plan. Perhaps the President's Science Advisory Committee, with its good record of advice on questions of science in national defense and foreign policy, should turn its attention to the advancement of medical research.—J.T.