

# Science in the News

## Science and Politics: AMA Attacked for Use of Disputed Survey in "Medicare" Lobbying

The American Medical Association, which found itself deeply involved in the Congressional fight over medical aid to the aged, last week was under attack for its use of a survey of the aged presented before the fifth congress of the International Institute of Gerontologists held at San Francisco in mid-August.

A widely distributed AMA press release said the survey "emphatically proves that the great majority of Americans over 65 are capably financing their own health care and prefer to do it on their own, without government intervention." The release said that "90 percent [of the sample] could think of no personal medical needs that were not being taken care of," and that only "a relatively small percentage of those who said they did have medical needs attributed the failure to meet these needs to lack of money." The release credited James W. Wiggins and Helmut Schoeck of Emory University as director and associate director of the study and listed 16 university sociologists from schools throughout the country as participating in the study.

The AMA endorsement and interpretation of the survey were picked up by newspapers across the country. Some papers used it as the basis for editorials opposing any large-scale federal plan for aid to the aged.

### Comments on the Survey

Last week Senators Eugene McCarthy (D-Minn.) and Pat McNamara (D-Mich.) began inserting in the Congressional Record comments on the survey from the "participating" sociologists and from officials of the congress on gerontology. Here are some excerpts: From Noel Gist of the Uni-

versity of Missouri: "I participated in a study of aging to the extent of supervising the interviewing of a sample of rural residents in Missouri. . . . The news release, by the use of my name . . . leaves the impression that I endorse the conclusions presented. . . . I do nothing of the sort. . . . It was quite obvious to me that the questionnaire sent to us was a very poor one, and seemed to be devised by amateurs in research. But since we agreed to do the interviewing for the project we completed the assignment."

From Clark Tibbits, chairman of the Executive Committee for the Americas, International Association of Gerontology: "I was in the audience when Professor Wiggins made his presentation. I was astonished at the data and conclusions reported. The basic figures on income, assets, and health status differ by as much as 100 percent from those reported by other studies during the past decade and from figures available through such standard sources as the Bureau of the Census, the Current Population Survey, and the National Health Survey."

From Wayne Thompson, of Cornell, a discussant of the paper: "I did not see a copy of the final paper until the day before it was read. . . . I must report that I was appalled to read the paper, which I found to be of such poor quality of scientific research technique and writing. Indeed, I regretted at that point that I had been so naive as to have accepted the paper without having seen it in advance, especially since it would be presented before an audience of internationally known scientists who might think of this as representing American sociology. . . . When the paper was actually presented, there was an immediate reaction on the part of the audience, attacking its unscientific character, and the ease with which Wiggins and Schoeck jumped to untenable conclusions. The survey was badly

designed, poorly conceived and completely misleading. Not a single scientist present at the meeting rose to support either Mr. Wiggins or his paper."

The critics suggested that the questionnaire had been drawn in a way that encouraged responses that would fit the preconceptions of the planners, a complaint that seemed to apply to at least the one question quoted in the news release. The multiple choice question was apparently intended to discover what the aged thought should be done to make medical coverage more easily available to them, but it did not list as an alternative the widely debated plan to add medical coverage to Social Security. "This [response]," said the official AMA interpretation, "demonstrates that the vast majority of our older citizens favor voluntary programs and that only 10 percent or so support compulsory plans."

### Defense of the Survey

The AMA release noted that the survey was "based on extended interviews with 1500 non-institutionalized persons 65 years of age and over . . . by trained interviewers under the supervision of professional sociologists representing more than a dozen well-known American universities and colleges." The survey critics said that in addition to aged persons in hospitals, homes for the aged, and other institutions, the survey left out all non-whites and all people on old age assistance. One of the participating sociologists said she had been instructed to interview no one living in an apartment, thus eliminating tenement dwellers from at least this part of the sample. In general, the critics suggested the sample had been biased against those who were most likely to be having difficulty meeting medical expenses.

In defense of the paper an AMA spokesman emphasized that the survey was designed by Wiggins as a study of the "normal" segment of the aged population. Wiggins made this point in the course of the paper. But neither the title of the paper ("A Profile of the Aging: USA") nor the AMA press release made clear that the survey was less than a study of the aging population as a whole. There was no mention of the "normal" idea in the press release, and no precise definition of what Wiggins regarded as "normal" in the paper itself.

The survey was financed by a \$20,-

000 grant from the Foundation for Voluntary Welfare. The foundation is a subsidiary of the William Volker Fund, which an AMA spokesman described as having a "conservative outlook." Wiggins is an unpaid consultant to the AMA's medical economics department.

### **The Rump Session: It Does What Is Absolutely Necessary, But Very Little More**

The rump session, by all accounts, will be over by the time this appears. A House-Senate conference committee has cut the Senate's recommendations for medical research by \$104 million, but the reduced appropriation is \$105 million more than the House bill would have allowed and \$160 million more than the Administration asked for. The school aid bill, about which there had been considerable optimism before the conventions, remained bottled up in the House Rules Committee. An attempt, after more than a year's delay, to compromise two widely differing bills on agricultural research was of interest mainly as an exercise in political maneuvering. In the areas of science and education, as elsewhere, the session did what was absolutely necessary, mainly clearing the remaining appropriation bills, and little more.

#### **The Rules Committee**

The House Rules committee dominated the last two weeks of the session. Six of its twelve members—two southern Democrats and all four Republican members—had entered into an informal arrangement to bar action on all controversial legislation. It takes a majority to move a piece of legislation out of the committee. The six allowed a minimum medical aid bill to go through, one far narrower than that advocated by either Kennedy or Nixon, indeed so narrow that it satisfied only those who would have preferred no bill at all. They let a minimum wage bill through after being assured by the House conferees that there would be no real compromise with the broad Senate bill. Kennedy and the Senate conferees were given the choice of taking the House bill or nothing. This was as far as the ruling six were prepared to go. The school aid bill and several other matters were buried.

In June, Nixon's office had let it be

known that he was trying to get one of the four Republicans to change his vote on the school bill, but he had no success. There was hope that B. Carroll Reece of Tennessee might be persuaded. He had promised his constituents during the 1958 election that he would not vote to block the school bill, but apparently he felt he had fulfilled his promise when he reluctantly supplied the vote needed to let the measure through to the House floor. When the bill passed and was sent back to the Rules Committee for permission to go to conference, Reece rejoined the six to block any further action.

The action on the school bill demonstrated more than anything else the immense power of the Rules Committee. The bill was strongly backed by Nixon, Kennedy, the Democratic leadership in the House, and within the Administration had the active support of Secretary Flemming of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and the passive support of the White House. A great deal of sympathy had been developed throughout the country, and the resulting pressure changed enough Republican votes to put the bill through the House despite the failure of attempts to pass similar bills in recent years. But the popular support had no effect on the Rules Committee.

Perhaps active pressure from the White House could have changed matters, but as in the past, it was not forthcoming. Whether Kennedy or Nixon could get the bill through next year is open to question. Most people think there will be a school bill next year. No one doubts that either Kennedy or Nixon would be much more willing than Eisenhower has been to use the powers of the White House to push for what he wants from Congress. Both seem thoroughly convinced of the need for federal aid to schools, while Eisenhower apparently has some doubts on the matter.

Presidential pressure, in fact, may not be necessary. Liberal Democrats took up a good deal of time in the closing days of the session denouncing what several of them called "this conspiracy." There has been talk about doing something about the Rules Committee for years. There were stirrings of revolt at the beginning of the present Congress, in 1959, but they resulted only in vague assurances that the committee would not use its powers to block legislation clearly supported

by a majority of the House. The experience this year is not likely to encourage anyone to settle for assurances next January. Howard Smith of Virginia, chairman of the Rules Committee, has been saying that he's heard thunder before and that it isn't always followed by a storm. The liberals have been guaranteeing that there will indeed be a storm next January. That the wind will blow no one doubts, but what the effect will be on Judge Smith will depend on the results of the election in November rather than the passion of the oratory this week.

#### **Funds for Medical Research**

The conference committee on the Labor-HEW appropriations bill followed the frequent practice of splitting the differences between House and Senate appropriation bills neatly down the middle. The major items to be dealt with were the funds for medical research through the National Institutes of Health. The Senate had voted \$209 million more than the House; the final bill appropriated \$105 million more than the House, a total of \$560 million. The Administration had asked for \$400 million.

The big increase raises the question of how much will actually be spent. As the fuss over defense appropriations demonstrated, the Administration doesn't have to spend extra money voted by Congress unless it chooses to do so. The procedure is for the agency involved to put in a justification to the Bureau of the Budget in order to use any money appropriated by Congress above the original Administration request. In the case of medical research funds, Congress has been regularly giving the Administration more than it has asked for and after some initial reluctance the Administration has ended up using nearly all of it.

This year the increase was especially big, but the new Administration coming in in January, the middle of the fiscal year, will probably be glad to use it all. Both Kennedy and Nixon say they are in favor of more money for medical research. There have been questions raised as to whether there are enough competent researchers available to make good use of all the money Congress has been voting. Officials at NIH have done some studies on this: examining the productiveness of marginal grants made possible by