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Whose Responsibility?

Congress this year authorized payments of up to 20 percent to cover the indirect costs on research grants from the National Institutes of Health, thus departing from the 15 percent limit imposed in each of the past several years. Indirect costs of up to 25 percent were authorized on grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

These actions will be a source of satisfaction on many campuses, for a recent survey by the National Science Foundation showed that actual indirect costs average about 30 percent [*Science* 136, 291 (1962)]. But the satisfaction should be accompanied by sober consideration of the fact that a number of congressmen are beginning to get restive over what they consider to be a lack of adequate controls over the expenditure of the large amounts of money they annually appropriate for research. Congressmen know that they cannot judge the merits of individual research proposals or fields of research. Moreover, they recognize the principle that scientific investigators should be allowed the greatest possible freedom of action in carrying out their research. But their concern over expenditures is altogether proper. They have a right to feel assured that the money they appropriate is wisely and properly used.

Thus they raise questions when an investigator devotes 10 percent of his time to a particular project and then charges the grant with the total cost of attending the annual meeting of his scientific society. They are even more concerned when the expenses of attending an international congress in Europe are charged to the grant. They question the amounts spent for furniture and equipment. They want to know why two grants to the same university or department should both call for the purchase of an electron microscope. They want to know how closely the institution and the granting agency audit a grantee's accounts. There is no fear that all grantees are dishonest, but there is fear that investigators, their institutions, and the grant-making agencies are sometimes careless, that proper fiscal controls have not been adopted, that "the moral obligations of the scientist as a trustee of public funds" have not been formulated and impressed upon all concerned.

So far, these concerns have been most clearly expressed by a subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations in a series of hearings and reports dealing with the National Institutes of Health and going back over the past couple of years. But NIH is not alone; other agencies also have large appropriations for research and training, and they too face the prospect of similar inquiries.

How should expenditures be controlled? In the hearings of the past two years, members of the subcommittee took the position that NIH should maintain equipment inventories, establish tighter regulations, and make more detailed analyses of proposed and actual expenditures. Officers of the NIH countered that these responsibilities should rest primarily with the grantee institutions and offered the argument that higher indirect cost allowances would enable those institutions to maintain better controls.

The decision is not yet made, and discussions will undoubtedly continue. This situation leaves the universities some option. Unless they can convince Congress that they understand, accept, and enforce "the moral obligations of the scientist as a trustee of public funds," it seems altogether likely that Congress, through legislation or through instruction to the granting agencies, will establish centralized means to enforce these obligations. Which do the universities prefer?—D.W.