Presidential Medicine: Johnson Panel, Lay and Medical, To Study Heart Disease, Cancer, and Strokes

The most noteworthy thing about President Johnson's new Commission on Heart Disease, Cancer and Strokes, announced in his health message to Congress and unveiled in a press conference last week, is that the President and some of his advisers appear to be serious about it. The commission, which will be headed by Michael DeBakey, chairman of the Department of Surgery at Baylor University College of Medicine in Texas, is composed of 28 persons prominent in medicine and public affairs. The reason for establishing the commission, according to the health message, is that, although "the flow of new discoveries, new drugs and new techniques is impressive and hopeful . . . the American people are not receiving the full benefits of what medical research has already accomplished." Accordingly, the commission, which has about equal numbers of lay and medical members, has been charged with "recommending steps that can be taken to reduce the burden and incidence of these diseases."

Committees are appointed in Washington with about the same regularity that congressmen make speeches saluting the Boy Scouts, and often for about the same reasons: the cause is popular, the action innocuous, and the constituents pleased. Ordinarily, a new health commission would fall into the Boy Scout category. On the face of it, the likelihood that heart disease, cancer, and strokes will yield to the resolutions of a presidential panel when they have resisted massive federal and private attack is about as great as the likelihood that Chubby Checker would make a better conductor for the New York Philharmonic than Leonard Bernstein. In this instance, though, it can be reported that, however baffling the idea may seem to some, the President and his political advisers are firmly persuaded that the new commission can make a real contribution.

This view is not shared by Johnson's science advisers, or by the Public Health Service, whose jurisdiction the commission in some ways overlaps. The White House Office of Science and Technology spends a good deal of its time trying to clarify the lines of science administration in the government, and to eliminate duplication. Neither of these efforts is likely to be facilitated by the new commission, and OST is extremely doubtful that a new committee—particularly one with the unusual composition of this one—will contribute much to the government's programs for fighting these diseases. For its part, the Public Health Service, parent agency of the National Institutes of Health, already runs an elaborate advisory apparatus through which medical authorities outside the government play a key role in formulating the federal medical research program. Understandably, the PHS is a bit lukewarm toward the competition. Although neither agency is to be in any way associated with the project, the administration's regular science overseers appear less troubled by their exclusion than by Johnson's apparent enthusiasm for mixing the science of medicine and the politics of popular causes, and assuming that science can come out on top.

Beyond the certainty that it did not originate within the government, the genesis of the commission is a bit unclear. A prime mover appears to have been Mary Lasker, whose generous and enthusiastic support of medical research (through the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation) has earned her a good measure of influence in political as well as medical circles. Mrs. Lasker, together with some medical and lay allies, began seeking such a presidential panel early in the Kennedy administration. The first fruit of these efforts was a rather abortive version of the present commission—a national committee on heart disease and cancer which everyone involved seems embarrassed to recall, and whose history is thus thoroughly confused.

The first committee met in 1961. It was convened either by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (as the White House reports)

Commission on Heart Disease, Cancer and Strokes

The other members of the commission are: Samuel Bellet, director, division of cardiology, Philadelphia General Hospital; R. Lee Clark, surgeon-in-chief, Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute, Houston, Texas; Charles Mayo, professor of surgery, Mayo Clinic; E. M. Papper, professor of anesthesiology, Columbia University; Helen Taussig, professor of pediatrics, Johns Hopkins; Howard Rusk, director, Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, New York; Edward Dempsey, dean, Washington University School of Medicine; Hugh Hussey, director of scientific activities, American Medical Association; Philip Handler, chairman, department of biochemistry, Duke University; John Meyers, chief, department of neurology, Wayne State University; Marion Fay, former president, Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania; Irving S. Wright, professor of clinical medicine, Cornell; Jane Wright, department of surgery, New York University; Barry Bingham, editor and publisher, Louisville *Courier-Journal*; John Carter, editor, *McCall's Magazine*; Marion Folsom, former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare; General Alfred Gruenther, retiring president, American Red Cross; James F. Oates, president, Equitable Life Assurance Society, New York; General David Sarnoff, chairman, Radio Corporation of America, New York; Mrs. Harry S. Truman; Emerson Foote, president, McCann-Erickson, Inc., New York; Arthur Hanisch, president, Stuart Company, Pasadena, California; J. Willis Hurst, specialist in internal medicine, and chairman of the department of medicine, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia; Sidney Farber, pathologist, and director of research, Children's Cancer Research Foundation, Boston; Frank L. Horsfall, president and director, Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research; W. Paul Sanger, Surgical Consultant to the Surgeon General, U.S. Army; Mrs. Florence Mahoney, co-chairman, National Committee Against Mental Illness.

or by the White House (as HEW reports), and it either wrote no report at all (as one of its members claims), wrote a report that was lost (as another member recollects), or wrote a report so inadequate that the government refused to release it (as a strategically placed government official claims). On only one point—that the committee accomplished nothing—is there general agreement.

After the President's father, Joseph Kennedy, suffered a disabling stroke, the concept of the commission was extended to include strokes, as well as heart disease and cancer, and the effort to get political support continued. How far it had progressed, and whether the commission would have emerged in the same form under Kennedy as it did under Johnson remain unknown. But the chances are high that some kind of commission would have been appointed.

Neither the mandate of the commission nor its probable form of operation have been spelled out very clearly so far. The hope is, apparently, that the commission will be able to get at the question of why the progress made in treating heart disease, cancer, and strokes seems incommensurate with the vast amount of money that has gone into their investigation. This topic offers the opportunity for a great deal of useful inquiry: How fast do the fruits of research find their way into medical practice? What is the time lag between a therapeutic discovery at Harvard and its application in the treatment of a Hazard, Kentucky, miner? Is the lag the result of high medical cost, or of unequal geographic distribution of medical talent? What can the government do about it? It is in dealing with these nonmedical issues, some of them extremely sensitive issues for the medical profession, that the lay members of the commission could exert their greatest influence.

As for the organization of the commission, that too is still uncertain. It will be financed without a congressional appropriation, from funds at the disposal of the President. The members will be paid as consultants, and it is assumed they will be given office space in a government building and provided with a small supporting staff. When or where they will meet for the first time has not been decided, but if they are to fulfill the order of Johnson's health message and have some recommendations ready by the end of 1964, it will have to be soon.—ELINOR LANGER

Announcements

The Metabolism Study Section of NIH's Division of Research Grants is considering the desirability of providing **bile acid and phospholipid standards for chromatography**. Scientists interested in receiving these chemicals are requested to submit lists of the standards they feel would be of value in their research. (The section does not plan to publish lists of standards, as was announced in this space 6 March.) Correspondence on the chemicals should be addressed to John C. Dalton, Metabolism Study Section, NIH, Bethesda, Md., by 1 June.

Louisiana State University has established a department of **entomology** within the college of agriculture. Courses will be offered leading to the B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees. L. D. Newsom heads the department.

Indiana University has created a division of **biological sciences**, which will include the departments of anatomy and physiology, botany, bacteriology, and zoology. Tracy M. Sonneborn, distinguished service professor of zoology, has been named temporary head of the new division.

The National Bureau of Standards recently announced that it has adopted the **International System of Units** (SI) for use by its staff. The NBS's future publications will use these units, except where their use "would obviously impair communication or would reduce the usefulness of a report to the primary recipients." Standards and measures which are in customary U.S. units, such as inches, pounds, and gallons, will continue to be calibrated in these terms.

The SI was defined and made official in a resolution of the 11th General Conference on Weights and Measures, in 1960. It is based on: meter (m), length; kilogram (kg), mass; second (s), time; ampere (A), electric current; Kelvin (°K), temperature; and candela (cd), light.

Grants, Fellowships, and Awards

The University of Illinois has available training grants in **oral histology** and **biology** for postdoctoral students aiming for a career in dental teaching and research. Recipients will have opportunities to participate in interdisciplinary research currently in progress, and to take courses in experimental embryology, histology, histochemistry, and submicroscopic morphology of oral tistues. Stipends, provided through NIH, are $5000 plus tuition and dependent allowances. (Dean, College of Dentistry, University of Illinois, 808 S. Wood St., Chicago 12)

Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg, is offering programs leading to the Masters and Ph.D. degrees in **environmental engineering statistics** or **water technology**. Chemists or biologists entering the water technology program will continue in their specialty, while taking courses on the problems and approaches to research in water supply and pollution control. Those entering the program in environmental engineering statistics will need advanced courses in mathematics and statistics, and a minor or joint major in stream sanitation, waste treatment, public health engineering, or water resources. Stipends for participants start at $200 per month; no teaching or laboratory duties are required. Applicants for fellowships must have an overall B average or a B average for their junior or senior undergraduate years. (H. R. Bungary, III, Department of Civil Engineering, V.P.I., Blacksburg, Va.)

Meeting Notes

An international symposium on **nonsteroidal, anti-inflammatory** drugs is scheduled 8–10 September in Milan, Italy. It is sponsored by the Mario Negri Institute of Pharmacological Research and the European Society of Biochemical Pharmacology; the official languages are Italian and English. The meeting will include sessions on metabolic modifications and chemical mediators during inflammatory processes; pharmacological methods in evaluation of anti-inflammatory drugs; and methodology and results in clinical trials of anti-inflammatory drugs. Participation will be limited to 200 persons. Deadline for applications: *31 May*. (S. Garattini, Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche "Mario Negri," Via Eritrea 62, Milan, Italy)

A conference on **activation analysis** will be held 27–28 August at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Sessions will deal with instrumental methods; biological, medical, and industrial ap-