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* *European Office:* 22 Mulberry Walk, London, S.W. 3, England (Telephone: 352-9749)

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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. See also page 7, *Science*, 4 July 1969. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Rm. 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE-6-1858.

Advocates and Opponents of Medical Research

For harassed federal science administrators, this year has been wearing. Contributing heavily to their problems have been the continuing uncertainties of their budgets. No Congress has been so slow to act. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) will learn in 1970 what it can spend in the fiscal year that began 1 July 1969.

The budget-making process for NIH is more simple than for some other agencies; a review illustrates problems and permits identification of friends and foes. Significant is the emergence of Senator Magnuson (D-Wash.) as an effective advocate of NIH (he has been a long-time supporter of science) and the identification of the Bureau of the Budget (BOB) as an opponent of medical research.

Work on the fiscal year 1970 budget began at NIH in the summer of 1968 and continued through that autumn. The proposed budget was then worked over by the BOB, an arm of the President. After Richard Nixon was inaugurated, the BOB made a further revision recommending that funds for research be cut \$100 million below the sums appropriated for fiscal 1969. After a fight in which Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Robert Finch backed NIH, the President recommended that the sum of \$1065 million be appropriated for the intramural and extramural research programs, a cut of \$43 million below the Johnson budget. The House Appropriations Subcommittee* held hearings in March 1969. The subcommittee, chaired by Representative Flood (D-Pa.), includes no member vigorously in favor of medical research. The Appropriations Committee did not cut the budget further, however, but went along with the Nixon recommendation. The House acted in July 1969.

On 1 July 1969, with appropriation action incomplete, the new fiscal year began. The Nixon administration was under pressure to hold down expenditures. The BOB apportioned tentative cuts in spending to the various departments, including Health, Education and Welfare. In turn, Secretary Finch instructed NIH to hold overall expenditures to about 90 percent of amounts spent the preceding year. At the same time, NIH was expected to spend more for training of health manpower, and the extra funds could come only from a deeper reduction in research funds. Faced with uncertainties in the budget, NIH informed some investigators that their funds would be cut by 20 percent. Many who submitted new applications received nothing.

The relevant Senate subcommittee† held hearings in October 1969. The atmosphere was friendly. As chairman, Senator Magnuson encouraged participation of other members of his subcommittee, and Senator Cotton (R-N.H.), the ranking minority member, was also helpful. As a result, the Senate bill called for substantial (about 10 percent) increases over amounts recommended by President Nixon and passed by the House. A House-Senate conference agreed on a sum that is about 5 percent above that originally recommended to Congress.

Even after an appropriations bill is signed by the President, funds are not spendable. Some time in 1970, the BOB will tell NIH what expenditures are permitted for a fiscal year that began more than 6 months earlier. The BOB has the power to thwart the will of Congress, and it may do so. If scientists wish to comment on support of medical research, they should address their letters of praise to Senator Magnuson and their complaints to President Nixon.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

* Members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health, Education and Welfare are Daniel J. Flood (chairman), William H. Natcher, Neal Smith, W. R. Hull, Bob Casey, Robert H. Michel, Garner E. Shriver, and Charlotte Reid.

† Members of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Departments of Labor and Health, Education and Welfare and Related Agencies are Warren G. Magnuson (chairman), Richard B. Russell, John Stennis, Alan Bible, Robert C. Byrd, Spessard L. Holland, Norris Cotton, Clifford P. Case, Hiram L. Fong, and J. Caleb Boggs.