Cancer Research Proposals: New Money, Old Conflicts

Cancer is not contagious. But the idea that cancer might soon be cured, if enough money is spent, has recently spread among science policy makers like an infectious disease. Triggered by the efforts of the "benevolent conspiracy" of health lobbyists surrounding philanthropist Mary Lasker, the infectious notion has already led to a rash of new money for cancer research. Moreover, government commitment to a campaign to cure cancer, a subject that has been debated for years, now appears certain.

In this year's State of the Union speech, President Nixon caught the bug and asked Congress for an additional $100 million for cancer research, declaring that "the same kind of concentrated effort that split the atom and took man to the moon should be turned toward conquering this dread disease." This represents quite a switch in policy. Just last year the Administration refused to spend an extra $28 million that Congress had tacked on to the National Institutes of Health budget for cancer research. That decision was reversed, however, following the President's speech.

New Cancer Authority

In spite of the new funds and Nixon's change of heart, the Laskerites remain dissatisfied with the government's attitude toward cancer research. To really get things going, they seek to transfer the responsibility for such research from NIH to a separate, highly visible National Cancer Authority, to be funded, they hope, at an annual level of $1 billion within 4 years. And even though President Nixon, NIH officials, and many, if not most research scientists, oppose the idea, the Laskerites claim they have the votes to get the measure through Congress.

The Laskerites and the NIH have clashed before—despite the fact that Mrs. Lasker, her late husband Albert (who died of cancer in 1952), and their allies masterminded the expansion of the NIH budget from $2.5 million in 1945 to its current level of $1.7 billion. Along with their pursuit of additional federal funds for biomedical research, the Laskerites have doggedly fought to bring research results out of the test tube to the patient's bedside. Judged in terms of health care benefits for the people, the NIH has always been found by the Laskerites to be somewhat lacking and in need of a shove in the right direction. This conflict reached a high point in 1966, when President Johnson, after much prodding by Mary Lasker, called the directors of all of the NIH institutes to his office on short notice and demanded to hear "what plans, if any, they have for reducing deaths and disabilities and for extending research in that direction" (*Science*, 8 July 1966). The resultant anxiety among biologists about the future of their profession was quelled only after Johnson helicoptered to Bethesda a year later and lauded basic research (*Science*, 28 July 1967).

Since those episodes, the Laskerites have ceased confronting NIH on a regular basis. One reason for this is the loss of the chummy access to the White House that Mrs. Lasker and her colleagues enjoyed during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. But cancer has long been one of Mrs. Lasker's main concerns. And the current spate of activity surrounding cancer research shows that the Lasker lobby is far from being a thing of the past.

Administrative structure, personalities, and, above all, finances, figure into the Laskerite's desire for a separate cancer authority. They view the current leadership of NIH and the National Cancer Institute, in particular, as lacking the imagination and the pizazz necessary to hustle for funds in Congress. Moreover, the administrative structure of NIH might prevent even the most enthusiastic Cancer Institute director from initiating a sudden explosion of his budget. The budget for the Cancer Institute passes through a series of administrative stages, and is trimmed in each one, before finally being offered to Congress as part of the NIH budget, rather than as a separate item for cancer. A NASA-like agency would quickly develop its own constituency on Capitol Hill. And since few congressmen would publicly oppose expenditures for cancer, the budget would soar.

In their quest for a separate authority, the Laskerites have employed both familiar and novel political maneuvers. Following the usual script, they engineered the establishment of a commission, filled with friendly faces, to study the problem and put forward a detailed rationale for the preordained solution. The Yarborough Cancer Commission (*Science*, 16 October 1970), appointed last April by the former Texas Senator, include among its members R. Lee Clark (chairman), president of the M. D. Anderson Institute in Houston, Sidney Farber, of Children's Hospital, Boston, and New York businessman Elmer Foote. All three are long-time Lasker associates and members of the 1964 Commission on Heart Disease, Cancer, and Stroke. Not surprisingly, the Commission, in its report released 4 December 1970, declared that the time was right for massive government expenditures for cancer and that this could only be done through a National Cancer Authority. Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D–Mass.), who replaced Yarborough as head of the Senate health subcommittee, and Representative Claude Pepper (D–Fla.), one of the oldest Lasker allies, offered the Commission's recommendations as legislation.

Republican Influence

Next, the standard strategy calls for hearings. Sometime in March or April, Kennedy's subcommittee will hear a parade of witnesses testify to the need for a separate cancer authority. The commission and hearings approach would have sufficed in itself during the Kennedy-Johnson era. However, the presence of a Republican in the White House required some new approaches, and these came about through an alliance with the American Cancer Society (ACS).

Although Mrs. Lasker has long been active in the American Cancer Society, the Laskerites and the Republican-dominated ACS have never before combined forces. Through the auspices of the ACS, three influential Republicans, Benno Schmidt of J. H. Whitney and Company, Elmer Bobst of Warner-Lambert Corporation, and Laurance Rockefeller, found their way onto the Yarborough panel. Bobst, a long-time financial supporter and confidant of President Nixon, reportedly paid the President a visit and urged him to support the Commission's recommendations.

But even without the conduit of Republican sugar daddies from the Yarborough Commission to the White

House, Nixon may have felt obliged to show a sudden interest in cancer research. Many Capitol Hill observers saw the $100 million offered by Nixon as nothing more than a device to fend off a political victory for Kennedy. Indeed, the bill to establish the new cancer authority has amassed considerable support in the Congress. Introduced with over 40 cosponsors, Kennedy's bill should pass the Senate with little difficulty. In the House, however, where the bill has 112 cosponsors, one subcommittee chairman stands in the way. Representative Paul C. Rogers (D–Fla.), the new head of the health subcommittee through which the measure must pass, has already spoken against the bill in speeches before the House, and he seems inclined to tie up the bill in committee. But Mrs. Lasker and her friends have leaned heavily on such recalcitrant lawmakers in the past. In addition to the Laskerites, Representative Rogers, and other congressmen who might oppose the new cancer authority, will be hearing from the American Cancer Society and the citizens' groups that it influences. ACS recently adopted, as official policy, the need for a separate cancer authority and sent the word along to its local divisions. Thus, someone walking into a cancer society office to find out what he can do about cancer might be advised to write his congressman and demand a new cancer authority. Even the Lamplighters, a group of parents of leukemic children, whose pleas for additional research funds often move congressmen to action, have been counseled by ACS to demand the separate authority.

Nixon's Compromise

In the face of such a movement, the President could hardly appear to be ignoring cancer research. Rejecting the idea of a separate authority, he offered a compromise. The $100 million, Nixon declared in his recent health message to Congress, will go to a new "Cancer Conquest Program" that will be at the directorate level within NIH. The program will be run by a management group and supported by an "Advisory Committee on the Conquest of Cancer." All this adds up to a transplant of the Yarborough Commission's proposals back into NIH.

In a 13 February speech before the Association of American Medical Colleges, Presidential Science Adviser Edward David spelled out the Administration's rationale for keeping the new cancer program within NIH. Declaring the President's proposal to be a "totally revolutionary venture," David said that "having honed and sharpened our biomedical research mechanism, the National Institutes of Health, we should now use it and call upon it as we embark on this new adventure. To isolate the cancer effort would prejudice the very outcome we seek. The problem of cancer straddles virtually all the life sciences—any one or all of which might contribute to the final solution. No one is wise enough to pick and choose just those components of the total biomedical spectrum that will be vital. This aspect presents a stark contrast with Apollo and nuclear energy. Indeed, we do not believe in an AEC or NASA for cancer."

A good many research scientists side with the Administration in opposing the National Cancer Authority. In addition to the need for a coordination of the research effort through NIH, as expressed by David, the scientists fear that expenditures for applied results would quickly outpace available knowledge and would result in expensive, useless projects that would drain away funds from the necessary basic research. As Sol Spiegelman of Columbia University put it: "An all-out effort to cure cancer at this time would be like trying to land a man on the moon without knowing Newton's laws of motion."

Also at issue is the question of grants versus contracts. The Laskerites advocate the approach whereby a theory is worked out, and then a massive number of contracts are let to prove or disprove it. The scientists fear for their grants.

Resistance to Laskerite proposals along these lines has become a familiar scenario. The Laskerites see the scientists as narrow-minded laboratory dwellers who seek little more than self-indulgent research grants and who need, from time to time, to be pushed in the right direction. Lasker schemes, on the other hand, appear to many scientists as expensive, unscientific, and useless. Certainly the National Cancer Authority would fund applied cancer research as well as grants. And although the publicity for the proposal no longer mentions a cure for 1976 and PERT-type planning as it once did, planned and contracted research would assuredly be the mainstay of the program.

An increase in contracted research appears inevitable, however, even under the Nixon program. Science Adviser David told *Science* that, while the details have yet to be worked out, a portion of the expenditure for cancer research under the Administration's program would be distributed as contracts. And, as a Nixonian touch, many of the new contracts will be awarded to private industry. Backers of the Yarborough-Kennedy proposal, on the other hand, contend that NIH will find a way to direct most of the $100 million to basic research.

Patient Care

One key difference between applied research as seen by the Administration and by the Laskerites is patient care. One of the first undertakings of the National Cancer Authority would be to construct 25 new cancer centers throughout the country. These would be modeled on institutions such as New York's Sloan-Kettering or Houston's M. D. Anderson. While such facilities churn out a good deal of cancer research, they also treat patients. And the patients they treat often have a far better chance of survival than those treated in conventional hospitals. Bringing the best possible care to the most people has always been a major Laskerite goal. The Yarborough Commission report, however, declares that "the strengthening of existing cancer centers and the creation of new cancer centers does not mean that under this program general responsibility should be taken for the care of the nation's cancer patients." In so disclaiming an interest in patient care, the Laskerites are trying to avoid mistakes they made with the 1964 Heart Disease, Cancer, and Stroke Commission report. The bills introduced upon that Commission's recommendation called for numerous government-supported treatment and research centers for each of the three diseases. But Congress, under the guiding influence of the American Medical Association, quickly eradicated any hints in the bill of government-sponsored patient care. Even though their cancer bill would yield payoffs in terms of patient care, the Laskerites are trying to keep the theme of their current effort against cancer confined to research.

Nevertheless, the brand of research involved remains an issue. Differences between Laskerites and research scientists can be exaggerated, for they have many common goals. But what is at stake in practical terms is the allocation of comparatively limited resources.

James A. Shannon, who was director

of NIH for 13 years, put it this way: "In the Yarborough report, they talk of expenditure as an end in itself rather than a derivative of substantive proposals. If they got the funding they want," Shannon said in an interview with *Science*, "the cancer effort would represent 40 percent of the American biomedical effort. And the facilities and manpower just aren't available."

Shannon, who often opposed Mrs. Lasker in matters of basic versus applied research, agrees with the Administration's appraisal that it would be unwise to take cancer research out of NIH. "It would strip a broad and complex area of science away from contiguous areas. This," he declared, "would be bad for cancer research, and it would be bad for science."

Despite his opposition to the cancer authority idea, opposition that the Laskerites would put off as the predictable response of an ex-NIH bureaucrat, Shannon agrees with many of the ideas expressed in the Yarborough report. Shannon said that both the Yarborough and the Nixon reports have good elements. "Both," he said, "recognize the need for a broad scientific base as well as medical payoffs. Both establish priorities. And both would result in an increase in funds for research."

In addition, Shannon favors a vast increase in contracted cancer research. Alluding to the example of NASA's efforts to build a powerful rocket (where work was simultaneously carried out with solid, liquid, and nuclear fuels), Shannon indicated that contracts in biomedical research should be let along parallel lines for the same problem. "In the past," he said, "only one theory at a time has been tested. And this is one reason why contractual research in biology has such a bad reputation."

For something as diffuse as cancer research, the questions of what forms of support for science and what manner of organization of research will bring results can only be answered after the results are in hand. With or without their National Cancer Authority, the Laskerites have brought about major changes in cancer research including an increase in funding. This they did through the subterranean channels of politics so often shunned by scientists. And even if the scientists criticize Mary Lasker's sledge-hammer approach to the subtleties of basic versus applied research, they must face the fact that she gets them more money and the possibility that her schemes might be the right ones.

—ROBERT J. BAZELL

Science Junk: Funding Cuts Make Used Equipment Pile Up

Six IBM memory cores belonging to a 7032 computer sit unused in a General Services Administration (GSA) warehouse in San Francisco. At nearby Hunter's Point, the Navy Department has decided that it has no use for a $6 million cyclotron whole—and therefore it will be "cannibalized" and takers found for the pieces. Among the thousands of excess property items listed every month by the Columbus, Ohio, Defense Surplus Sales Office, is a 4000-pound bundle of brackets, bristles, cables, converters, energizers, and meters. Their condition: Unused. Their original price at time of acquisition: $139,939.

Idled scientists have received a great deal of publicity lately; but little has been said about the fate of their unemployed equipment. The fact is that federal cutbacks in basic research and the space program in recent years, and the wind-down of the Vietnam war, are causing the volume of used scientific and technical equipment to swell.

The volume of "excess" scientific equipment traded within government facilities and passed on to the commercial market or scrapped can only be guessed. Government property officers do not usually separate items by categories, such as scientific equipment. But the total quantity is enormous. In fiscal 1970, the Department of Defense (DOD) declared $7.3 billion worth of goods as excess; and the GSA similarly processed $3.3 billion worth of civilian items.* Other federal agencies traded upward of $500 million, making the total close to $11 billion! This is an increase of more than $2 billion since 1968, which observers say is due to the slowdown in Vietnam and to overall federal cutbacks. The portion of these totals that represents scientific equipment has swollen too, they say, as a result of tight funds.

There is a formal, bureaucratic network through which anyone receiving funds from the government can get goods, virtually free, from any other part of government. Officially, the system is meant to promote economy as well as a kind of equality-before-the-supply-officer among needy bidders.

But, in the special case of scientific equipment, scientists often prefer their own personal grapevines among colleagues and key property officials to get an inside track on what is coming onto the market—as well as to make advance agreements to get things for themselves.

In fact, there is some question whether the federal disposal system promotes the economies it should. The percentage of excess property actually redistributed is fairly low, and when goods are sold, the government gets only an estimated 3 to 5 cents on the acquisition dollar.

It is hard to be frugal about used scientific equipment, since much of it has no secondhand use. Nonetheless, many scientists complain that the federal disposal system doesn't meet their needs. Even now, when pennies count more than ever, many scientists eligible for free property through the system are shunning it and buying used items from commercial dealers instead.

On the other hand, federal property officers trying to promote economies feel frustrated by some scientists who hoard their equipment—in some cases even hiding it—rather than share with each other. Other scientists, they say, fail to see that hard times are here and insist "on a brand new shovel every time they dig a ditch."

Certainly this secondhand goods market produces some bizarre transactions. Scrapped weapons were used

* These figures represent the original cost, or the acquisition value, and do not indicate depreciation nor condition of goods. The GSA also screened $1.4 billion of goods from DOD, making its overall fiscal 1970 total $4.7 billion.