LETTERS

NIH Management

Barbara J. Culliton has reported perceptively on some of the problems at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). I believe, however, that the impressions she gained (News and Comment, 10 Jan., p. 47) from the press conference held by the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), which included the director of the FAS and five leading scientists from the NIH, do not represent a majority view of NIH scientists.

I know of no sizable movement for an independent NIH or of strong feelings that NIH scientists should be "left . . . alone to do their thing." The *Washington Post*, in an editorial published on 27 December 1974, correctly concluded (from some of the same scientists that Culliton talked to) that "scientists agree that they cannot live in splendid isolation . . .[b]ut they consider themselves qualified to participate in the decisions about the . . . methods . . . their science ought to pursue in order to obtain the most promising results."

That is the nub of the problem. What scientists inside and outside the NIH object to is "targeted" research selected by managers and legislators who are politically motivated and seek advice from scientific entrepreneurs who have power and are articulate, to the exclusion of advice from working scientists. This is partly the fault of the scientists who, as Culliton says, "have a knack for putting [arguments] in ways that sound self-serving." But it is also the fault of managers, legislators, and some reporters who do not make the effort to separate what some scientists say some of the time from what the majority of scientists mean.

Let's continue to have targeted goals, programs, and managers. But let working scientists into the programming and managing processes at the highest levels, appoint managers that have an understanding of how scientific research works, keep the system flexible enough so that serendipitous discoveries and flashes of genius are not suppressed, and above all do not sacrifice scientific quality for perceived program needs.

Finally, don't make the NIH an independent agency. There may be an argument for a separate Department of Health including the NIH, but biomedical research needs the support of disease-oriented programs. If the raison d'être for biomedical research is only intellectual curiosity, it can expect a level of support equivalent, say, to archeology.

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Vigorous Vitamins

Reports that vitamin A may be endowed with Antitumor activities (Research News, 27 Dec. 1974, p. 1198) follow the announcement that vitamin E promotes Eternal youth (Research News, 20 Dec. 1974, p. 1105) and the already notorious claim that vitamin C prevents Colds. It is to be expected that new activities for some of the other vitamins will be discovered shortly. Thus vitamin B might cure Baldness (or Botulism), vitamin D could work miraculously against Dengue, and vitamin K is very possibly an excellent agent for Kleptomania.

Has anybody got a few milligrams of vitamin S (for Skeptics)?

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Thomas H. Maugh's report on vitamin A and its relation to carcinogens presents several provocative points, the most significant of which is the observation that the primary thrust of cancer therapy has been toward treatment *after* the development of malignancy.

The *Ten-State Nutrition Survey* (*1*) brought to light the marked incidence of vitamin A deficiency in this country. Further, Jennings (*2*) has reviewed at length the interrelation of vitamin A metabolism and various endocrine abnormalities. For instance, it has been noted in humans with diabetes or hypothyroidism that conversion of dietary sources of carotene to vitamin A is almost completely blocked. Diabetes has long been noted as a disease in which neoplasm incidence is excessive. Further, mild depletion of vitamin A has been shown to inhibit synthesis of deoxycorticosterone to corticosterone. Severe depletion of vitamin A has been demonstrated to inhibit glucocorticoid synthesis, which amounts to "chemical