Congress Looks Harder at Cancer

Ever since President Nixon launched his crusade against cancer, the National Cancer Institute has enjoyed immensely increased budgets from Congress and the Administration with few hard questions asked. Cancer's privileged immunity may now be coming to an end. A few congressmen are beginning to question the priorities of the national cancer program. Their concerns are prompted by the recent upturn in the national cancer mortality rate, a growing alarm about environmental carcinogens, and a feeling that the National Cancer Institute should now be asked to show some results of the largesse thrust upon it.

Congress is by no means ready to mandate a major reordering of priorities. Last September, for example, an attempt by Senators Alan Cranston (D–Calif.) and Gaylord Nelson (D–Wis.) to take money away from the National Cancer Institute and distribute it to other members of the National Institutes of Health was defeated by a vote of 62 to 19. Nonetheless, the vote indicates a certain cooling of senatorial ardor from the days when Nelson was the only member to vote against the hubristically named Conquest of Cancer Act in 1971.

Early this month the House Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee announced that it will inquire into the quality of research conducted by the National Cancer Institute. The subcommittee, which held an important review of the National Institutes of Health in the 1960's, also plans to look at the other institutes which have received budget increases, such as the National Heart and Lung Institute. Cancer, however, is first on its list.

"We have had 4 years of increased budgets for cancer, and we want to see what the American public is getting for its money," says committee staff member Gilbert Goldhammer. A chief interest with the committee is to know what the National Cancer Institute is doing about environmental carcinogens and how it is coordinating the actions of the other agencies involved in the area. The committee will also look at the institute's heavy investment in the role of viruses in cancer. "It sounds reasonable to assume that there must be a virus causation in humans," observes Goldhammer, "but why can't this be established after so many years of effort in the area? Is this a blind alley? We don't expect the National Cancer Institute to produce a magic cure from a hat, but we do want to know if they are on the right track."

The subcommittee staff will decide whether to recommend hearings after talks with National Cancer Institute director Frank Rauscher.

Another congressman to express opposition to the present priorities of the national cancer program is Representative David R. Obey (D–Wis.). Obey, a member of the House appropriations subcommittee that reviews the health budget, is a close friend of his fellow Wisconsinian and cancer critic Senator Nelson. In a recent newsletter to constituents, Obey argues that research funds have been misallocated, that prevention has been underemphasized, and enforcement efforts misdirected.

"Because Congress and the Administration have been engaging in a misguided political race to show who cares most about cancer, the budget for the National Cancer Institute has more than tripled in the last 5 years (from $233 to $743 million). But that growth in NCI's budget has been financed by strangling the budgets of other research institutes. . . ." A second problem, according to Obey, is that the regulatory agencies responsible for preventing human exposure to environmental carcinogens have been neglected in the rush to pour money into the NCI simply because it is labeled "cancer institute."

The position of the National Cancer Institute is that it is well aware of the existence of environmental carcinogens and is devoting an appropriate share of its resources to the problem. Just over $100 million, or 17 percent of its total budget, was spent on environmental carcinogenesis in 1974, director Rauscher told the Senate subcommittee on the environment. Rauscher accepts the widely quoted estimate that 60 to 90 percent of all cancer has an environmental cause. But according to James A. Peters, the institute's director for cancer cause and prevention, tobacco probably accounts for 40 percent of the cancer mortality, dietary factors may be responsible for 25 to 30 percent, and occupational factors for another 10 percent. This leaves only 10 to 15 percent attributable to environmental pollution. "Are we doing enough about environmental carcinogenesis?—We think we are," says Peters.—N.W.

cide what courses to teach, whether to gear graduate courses toward academic employment, and how many graduate students to admit, and by state legislators who allocate funds to universities.

Breneman claims that students generally consider advice of others, such as a professor, when deciding on graduate careers rather than going directly to projections of the future job market. However, if the professors obtain their ideas of future job markets for Ph.D.'s from NSF and BLS projections, these projections could indirectly influence students' decisions. The BLS explicitly hopes its projections will be used in this way when it states, in its report, that, from its estimates, "valuable insight can be obtained for planning careers, education and training."

Because the NSF and BLS projections are widely used, some critics contend that attempts should be made to incorporate more realistic assumptions into the models. For example, Breneman and his associate Richard Freeman of Harvard University point out that students in sciences and engineering react strongly to the job market when making career decisions, as exemplified by the market downturns in enrollments in graduate physics programs when the job market for physics Ph.D.'s became bleak. These investigators feel that the lack of explicit feedback mechanisms to account for this effect is a serious drawback of models such as those used by the NSF and the BLS.

Cognizant of the inevitable criticisms of projections, Falk and Abramson stress that people should look not at the numbers but at the trends that appear in the NSF and BLS results. Both models lead to projections of surplus Ph.D.'s, and Abramson contends that the projections should serve as a warning that past trends cannot be continued. However, others claim that if a policy-maker sees a projection of a 7.7 percent oversupply of life scientists in 1985, his course of action might be different from that selected if the projection is a 47 percent oversupply. Kidd, in fact, believes that people who see such disparities between the NSF and the BLS estimates are likely to ignore both projections.

Since the making of projections is such an inexact science, Breneman suggests that forecasters may be asking the wrong questions. Compared to labor markets, future college enrollments and needs for new faculty members can be predicted with far greater confidence; and, from demographics alone, it seems likely that few future Ph.D.'s will obtain academic employment. Such predictions could be used to encourage universities to train graduate students for careers in industry or in research and development firms and laboratories and to