NIMH Emphasizes the Basics

Its new director Shervert Frazier is intent on raising the status of research on the major mental illnesses

Shervert Frazier, the outspoken new director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), has made it clear in his less than 4 months in office that his driving purpose is to liberate NIMH from its underdog status in the biomedical health establishment.

Frazier, 63, is known to colleagues as a human dynamo who can get a morning's work done by 7 a.m. He brings to the institute an impressive background that combines research, teaching, and administration, and a reputation as a competent and flexible administrator. He has spent the last 12 years as chief of psychiatry at Harvard's McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, where he is credited with creating a vital research program.

His appointment to NIMH has been greeted with widespread approval among both psychiatrists and psychologists. David Jenness, a neuropsychologist who heads the Consortium of Social Science Associations, says Frazier has an "ideal background" and can be counted on to support a sustained effort in intramural research while recognizing good new ideas in the extramural program. Jenness also says he has a "reputation for candor" and "stood up against Harvard" when the university announced plans to sell McLean to a private corporation.

All his skills are now being put to the test as NIMH struggles to obtain resources commensurate with the task at hand. At present, the research budget for mental illness is about 0.5 percent of the costs incurred in treatment. (Twenty-five percent of the nation's hospital beds are occupied by schizophrenics, according to NIMH.) The agency is being subjected to the same budget directive that has set all NIH in an uproar—the number of new research grants is supposed to be reduced from 352 (the fiscal year 1985 authorization) to 277 in 1985 and 1986. The total research budget is to be reduced 4.5 percent to $190.3 million.

Behavioral research is not warmly endorsed in this Administration, but the main problem, in research on addictions as well as mental illnesses, is the still-pervasive public stigma attached to these disorders. Advocacy groups are Balkanized and ill-financed, and most observers believe the only solution to chronic underfunding is the development of a heart- or cancer-style constituency. Frazier is keenly aware of this problem and said he was encouraged by the increase in organized activities among families of the mentally ill.

Frazier acknowledged he has modified some of his views since his arrival at NIMH. In January, a month after his arrival, he led off an interview with a discussion of the plight of the homeless chronically mentally ill—one of the most intractable problems psychiatry faces today. He dwelt on the rising rates of suicide among teenagers and homicide among blacks. He criticized biomedical researchers for being caught up in "exotic" investigations and ignoring as "prosaic" the urgent area of research on services—such as the behavioral management of the mentally incompetent. Ultimately, he said, he favored the establishment of a "behavioral sciences institute" that would include anthropological and cultural investigations into the antecedents of pathological behavior.

Constance Holden

Shervert Frazier

Human dynamo.

In a second interview, in March, he struck other themes. Asked about priorities, he said research on schizophrenia is number one, followed by research on childhood mental disorders, which as yet "do not have a fully developed research field." Research on affective disorders (depression and bipolar illness) is also a top priority, but this area is doing relatively well because it gets more money from private sources.

Frazier reiterated his concern about the homeless mentally ill (adding that the non–mentally ill homeless were not NIMH's business), but said he felt that research on their service needs did not hold "immediate promise."

Frazier indicated that he has no desire to return NIMH to the heavy involvement in research on social issues, such as the effects of poverty and racism on mental health, that prevailed in the late 1960's and 1970's. Many people believe the agency's credibility was damaged by this emphasis, and Frazier says social advocacy research "is not appropriate in a mental health institute." In stressing the need for a "balance" between biological and behavioral research, he made it clear that more weight belongs on the basic biological research end.

Asked about the handling of behavioral research within the National Institutes of Health, Frazier said, "I think the climate at NIH is changing" with regard to the relationship of health to behavior. He cited in particular the behavioral medicine program at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute and the pain treatment program launched by the National Institute for Dental Research. He claimed that NIH grant review groups are increasingly referring behavioral research proposals to categorical institutes rather than to NIMH. He also noted that Alzheimer's disease and AIDS, probably the most highly publicized diseases of the past year, have prompted many researchers to recognize the inextricability of biological and behavioral factors, and this "opens the door to behavioral considerations in other illnesses." Nonetheless, he feels that research to identify specific behavior-disease mechanisms is getting short shrift, largely because institutional setups are not conducive to interdisciplinary research.

Frazier appears concerned that potential organizational changes could operate to the detriment of research in the behavioral and neurological sciences. He has decided that an institute devoted purely to behavioral sciences would be a bad idea—"nobody would listen to it." Behavioral research must not be separated from its biological substrate, says Frazier, particularly in research on mental illness. Conversely, the islanding of neurobiological research would make it vulnerable to the "reductionism" of some

neuroscientists, who believe "every thought, every feeling can be explained in neuronal terms."

The question of whether NIMH should go back to NIH recurs with increasing frequency these days. At the NIMH council meeting in February, it was noted that the agency's research budget began a long-term falloff in growth in 1966, the year it was split off from NIH. Frazier says he has not yet decided what would be the better course, but he clearly wants to position the agency so that it would be perceived as qualified to reenter the fold. He is considering changes to streamline the organization of the agency and "accentuate basic research." Asked if he "is going all out to prove NIMH is not 'soft,' " Frazier said, "Exactly right, that's as clear as it ever was put."—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Europe Tries Cooperation on Military R&D

Economic and technical incentives, coupled with pressure from the United States, are forcing European governments to explore new links

Paris. Europe's defense ministers are expected to announce at a meeting in London next month their endorsement of a list of 30 research fields with important military implications that they consider ripe for collaboration. The fields range from sophisticated computer software to the use of gallium arsenide semiconductors.

The list has been compiled from proposals prepared by each of the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as non-NATO member France, in close discussion with their respective defense industries. Although there is no guarantee that concrete research projects will materialize in each case, the very existence of a single list is significant, for it represents the first step toward the integration of Europe's military research efforts. Such a goal has been discussed for many years. Indeed, it has frequently been advocated by the United States as a way of increasing the overall efficiency of Europe's military capabilities without a significant increase in defense expenditures.

In the past, however, national rivalries have proved a formidable barrier, and cooperation has been restricted either to specific military technologies or to fields such as space research, where economics alone has made collaboration inescapable. But the mood is now changing. "We are currently seeing the development of a new European cohesion [in military research] that many thought would not be possible," says one member of the British delegation to NATO.

Several factors are responsible for this change. One is merely a growing realization of the cost of maintaining separate military research programs. It has been calculated, for example, that of the $75 billion currently being spent annually by NATO members on R&D, up to 25 percent represents a duplication of effort.

"The West cannot go on luxuriating in too many different types of similar weapons systems," Sir Frank Cooper, chairman of one of Britain's largest defense contractors, United Scientific Holdings, recently wrote. "We should save the research and development money. . . . More collaboration must be essential."

Adding to the pressure to economize is the fact that European governments have agreed, partly under U.S. pressure, to modernize their military forces at a time when their economies remain weak, and many are already committed to major defense expenditures.

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The British government, for example, is currently looking for substantial economies in its military budget to cover the unexpectedly high costs of the Trident missile. In France, companies such as the missile and rocket engine manufacturer Societe Européenne de Propulsion, which had previously looked almost entirely to the government for support, is having to raise long-term research funds on the international capital market.

A third factor encouraging more collaborative research is a move, again encouraged largely by the United States, toward the wide-scale introduction of what are known as "emerging technologies" into Europe's conventional weapons systems, on the argument that technological superiority has an important "multiplier effect" in balancing Warsaw Pact firepower.

Finally, as in the civilian sector with the European Commission's ESPRIT program in microelectronics, closer research collaboration is being seen as the only way in which Europe's defense industry can remain competitive with the United States—particularly as U.S. export controls threaten Europe's access to the latest American defense technologies.

A combination of these reasons has encouraged greater willingness to cooperate on military R&D projects in large and small countries alike, both arguing that a rationalization of resources and some form of division of labor is essential if their armed forces are not to be reduced to buying "off the shelf" from American contractors.

The major political initiative in this direction has come from Britain's Minister of Defence, Michael Heseltine. Domestically, Heseltine has introduced a number of steps—including most dramatically plans to sell several government research centers, such as the Royal Ordnance Factories, to the private sector—in an effort to reduce a military research budget that, at $1.6 billion, is currently almost as large as that of the rest of Europe combined.

Last November, Heseltine tried to persuade his European colleagues to follow the same strategy at a European level. At a meeting in The Hague of the Independent European Program Group (IEPG), a high-level body that operates in the general framework of NATO, Heseltine argued that all European defense ministers should explore ways in which they could harmonize research programs on the components of future weapons systems. As a first step in what Heseltine subsequently described as a "political breakthrough," defense ministers attending the meeting endorsed the search for a number of potential "cooperative technology projects."

Since last November, the search has