

Experts Fault Leadership on AIDS

Federal budgets for education, testing, and counseling fall far short of what is needed, and political leadership is lacking, according to a General Accounting Office survey

IF the Senate wanted any justification for raising the budget for AIDS prevention, a report it got from its General Accounting Office (GAO) on 12 August certainly does the trick.

The report, requested by Senator Lawton Chiles (D-FL), chairman of the Senate subcommittee on health appropriations, will probably see a lot of action in the coming battle over AIDS funding.

To produce the briefing paper, GAO interviewed 21 AIDS experts, including 14 state and local authorities. Their consensus: President Reagan's proposed budget of \$247 million for FY 1988 is extremely short of the mark. The experts want the government to increase funding for education, testing, and counseling services by at least another \$365 million next year.

That is no surprise. Among the seven individuals interviewed by GAO for a "nationwide perspective," five served on last year's oft-quoted report on AIDS sponsored by the Institute of Medicine and National Academy of Sciences. That report recommended that by 1990 about \$1 billion should be spent on prevention.

Among the specifics discussed in the GAO report were:

■ **Lack of leadership.** The GAO report states, "Many told us that the perceived lack of federal leadership is at least as troublesome as the estimated shortfalls in the budget." Those experts interviewed by *Science*, however, say there is no lack of leadership at the National Institutes of Health, the Surgeon General's office, and the Centers for Disease Control.

"The lack of leadership refers to the President. And it is not perceived. It is real," says Sheldon Wolff of the Tufts University School of Medicine. Adds Deborah Cotton, clinical director of AIDS at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston: "It's like trying to conduct a war with no interest in the Executive Branch."

■ **More funds to limit the spread of AIDS virus among intravenous drug users.** "If we don't contain the virus in the IV drug community, we don't contain the virus," says Don Des Jarlais of the New York State Division of Substance Abuse Services. Many public health workers believe that IV

drug users may be the chief conduit for transmitting the AIDS virus into the heterosexual population.

Even with 33,000 slots in New York City's methadone and detoxification programs, there are still waiting periods of up to 3 months, reports Des Jarlais, who adds that fear of AIDS is driving more of the city's addicts into treatment centers. Of the 750,000 IV drug users in the country, 200,000 are in New York City, and more than 50% of those tested have been exposed to the AIDS virus.

Des Jarlais says that educational messages do reach the drug-using population. For example, as a marketing device some New York City dealers are including "free" syringes and hypodermic needles with every purchase of heroin. A black market in used needles repackaged as sterile has also cropped up. Possession of needles is restricted in New York.

Reagan's proposed budget calls for \$70 million for education and testing of IV drug users. There are no AIDS funds earmarked for drug treatment, however. Des Jarlais would like to see \$50 million to \$150 million for methadone maintenance and detoxification programs. Says Des Jarlais: "We need to do what we're doing now, and multiply it by ten."

■ **More funds to expand voluntary test-**

ing and counseling services. In Boston, a person seeking an anonymous test today for exposure to the AIDS virus must wait about 10 weeks to get an appointment. Similar waits are reported in other major cities.

The experts told GAO that education campaigns will only increase the strain on the testing and counseling centers as more and more low-risk individuals come in to be assured that they have not been exposed to the AIDS virus. The President's proposed budget is \$92 million for testing and counseling services. The GAO's experts think an additional \$250 million is needed.

■ **More funds and heightened sense of urgency needed for education.** Reagan proposed \$155 million for AIDS education, including funds earmarked for IV drug users, health care workers, and "other high risk groups." Conspicuous by its absence is any reference to homosexual men. Representatives from the American Medical Association and others suggested increasing AIDS education by three to five times over FY 1987 levels, calling for a massive education campaign.

How well the health care community could spend such a surge of funding has been questioned. But, says Wolff, "If we don't start spending money now, when do we?" ■ **WILLIAM BOOTH**

Researcher Flouts Gene-Splicing Rules

An outdoor experiment initiated in June by a Montana State University (MSU) professor is being condemned by industry and government officials as well as environmentalists. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is expected to levy penalties against Gary Strobel, a plant pathologist, who was seeking to test a method for improving the ability of elm trees to resist Dutch elm disease. Strobel developed a strain of the bacterium *Pseudomonas syringae* using recombinant DNA techniques and injected it into trees on the university's campus without obtaining a federal permit to release the organism into the environment.

Industry officials have reacted with alarm to the experiment, fearing that it could lead Congress to impose stricter regulations on such research. Bruce Mackler, general counsel for the Association of Biotechnology Companies, hopes Congress will see Strobel's action as an isolated incident. "The sins of academe should not be placed upon the biotech industry," said Mackler.

Richard Godown, executive director of the Industrial Biotechnology Association, said that the researcher should be penalized severely. "We encourage EPA to throw the book at Gary Strobel." The researcher also could be penalized by the university, the state, the National Science Foundation, and

the National Institutes of Health.

Strobel began his experiment on 13 June by injecting the modified bacteria into 14 elm trees located behind the university's stadium. The bacteria are not perceived as a threat to the environment, but their use in an outdoor experiment was subject to federal review because the organisms had been genetically altered. The strain of *P. syringae* was modified through the insertion of an *Escherichia coli* plasmid containing genes that code for an antifungal protein.

On 3 July, says Cliff Bond, chairman of MSU's Biosafety Committee, Strobel infected 28 American elm trees (*Ulmus americana*) that are 10 to 18 years old with the Dutch elm fungus, *Ceratocystis ulmi*. The university biosafety committee did not become aware of the experiment until 27 July, when it received a letter from Strobel, dated 13 July, describing the experiment. EPA began investigating the matter shortly thereafter.

Following a 12 August meeting of MSU's biosafety committee, Strobel was quoted as saying that he was "expressing civil disobedience" to protest federal regulations that have put a "restrictive environment" around scientific research involving the release of recombinant organisms. Strobel first contacted EPA in May or early June about obtaining a permit and then on 15 June actually applied for one—2 days after he had injected the elm trees with the modified organism. EPA officials advised Strobel that it would take about 3 months to obtain a permit.

Strobel's primary motivation for proceeding with the experiment without a permit was the need to begin in June or July when the Dutch elm fungus is most active. Obtaining a permit would have meant waiting until next summer. It appears, however, that this delay could have been avoided had Strobel submitted his field trial proposal to federal authorities earlier. Strobel had been aware of the potential antibiotic effects of the modified organism for years. He wrote a paper on the subject, which appeared in *Plasmid* (volume 13, pages 200–204) in 1985, according to Bond.

Bond told *Science* that Strobel's action was particularly disturbing since he introduced the Dutch elm disease into the Bozeman, Montana, area by infecting the university trees. EPA and university officials say the disease has not been detected in the Bozeman area. The risk of spreading is considered minimal since MSU's biosafety committee now plans to destroy the infected trees.

The university's biosafety committee is calling Strobel's action a "flagrant violation of federal regulations and university policy." Strobel could not be reached for comment. ■ **MARK CRAWFORD**

Census a Public Burden?

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has stirred up a hornet's nest of outrage and concern with what appeared to be a proposal to eliminate about one-third of all the questions from the 1990 census forms now in preparation.

The OMB, at a congressional hearing hastily called in response to complaints, has insisted that it made no "proposal" but merely attempted to "raise questions" about certain items in line with its responsibility to reduce the paperwork burden to the public under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980.

The stir has resulted from a 24 July meeting between staff members from OMB and the Bureau of the Census at which OMB officials produced a list of questions that they reportedly said "should be" eliminated or moved to the longer sampling form. The "100% form" is sent to all 96 million households in the country; the long form goes to 1 in 6. Two-thirds of the items in question deal with housing, including items designed to elicit information on rental costs, home heating and utilities, value of housing, real estate taxes, and insurance. OMB also expressed doubts about questions on fertility, migration, unemployment, and commuting.

The OMB Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs chairs the Federal Agency Council on the 1990 Census, which for the past 3 years has been conducting public hearings and running pretests of census questions in selected areas of the country. Census officials were therefore surprised and alarmed at what appeared to be a last-minute switch by OMB.

Senator Paul Sarbanes (D-MD), chairman of the Joint Economic Committee, responded by calling a hearing on 7 August which featured a lengthy grilling of Wendy Lee Gramm, director of OMB's regulatory affairs office. Gramm strenuously sought to quell the alarm, insisting that the notion that OMB had made a "proposal" to cut questions was "absolutely wrong, incorrect, and irresponsible." She said, however, that OMB believes some of the data could be obtained from other sources, some questions would yield data of doubtful reliability, and others did not need to be asked of the whole population.

It has not been suggested that shortening the forms would save any money for the government, which expects to lay out \$2.6 billion for the 1990 census. Rather, the object is to reduce the "burden" on the public. OMB estimates that it takes 45 minutes to fill out the long form and 15 minutes for the 100% form, which adds up to \$450 million at \$15 an hour. Committee members were skeptical. Sarbanes said the estimate was "grossly overstated" in view of the fact that the median hourly wage is about \$10. Representative James Scheuer (D-NY) said, "I can't remember constituent complaints about the census."

But while it is not clear what constitutes an undue public burden, public and private organizations—many of whom have written letters to OMB—have been very explicit about what the loss of 30 census questions would mean. Officials from various federal agencies say the data are needed for the administration of housing, transportation, and employment programs as well as economic indicators such as the Consumer Price Index. Detailed migration and fertility data (the fertility question has been in almost every census since 1890) are especially needed by local governments. Businesses and researchers also rely heavily on the contested items.

Katherine Wallman of the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics says that the decennial census is the only source for geographically fine-grained data and data that are comparable for all areas of the country. She says only questions of proven reliability have emerged from the long winnowing process.

The upshot of the fuss has been that OMB has extended the public comment period for census bureau proposals from 7 August to 14 September. The census bureau has resubmitted its justifications for the items in question. Time is short, as the final form for the census "dress rehearsal," scheduled for 20 March 1988, has to go to the printer by the beginning of October.

The census uproar is only the latest manifestation of widespread discontent with OMB's role with regard to federal data-gathering activities (*Science*, 21 November 1986, p. 934). The paperwork act requires OMB to approve public surveys proposed by government agencies. But many have complained over the years that the agency has used the act to obstruct the collection of data that it regards as unnecessary or the business of the private sector. ■ **CONSTANCE HOLDEN**