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The Choosing of the NIH Director

The appointment of a new director of the National Institutes of Health has been in limbo for some time, held up by the inappropriate politicization of the position. Recent news indicates that the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Louis Sullivan, and the President's science adviser, D. Allan Bromley, personally intervened with the President to keep the appointment from being based on a political litmus test, specifically the candidate's position on abortion.

Requiring these candidates to respond to questions on such controversial subjects as abortion should never have been considered, because using such an issue instead of actual qualifications for selection could only hurt both the director of NIH and the President. Then, if the candidate agreed with the political viewpoints of the President, he or she would be viewed in the scientific community as having been appointed because of sycophancy, rather than because of professional ability. If, on the other hand, the candidate disagreed with the President, his or her positions on topics in which scientific expertise was essential might be compromised. It was crucial for the President to affirm that the NIH director will be chosen solely on the basis of scientific competence.

The director must make some policy decisions, and there are those who will argue that any limitation on the scope of those decisions would be a detriment to biological science. Policy decisions, such as the distribution of contracts and grants, the objectivity and the operation of study sections, the need to fund young investigators and so forth, are so vital to the successful pursuit of research that the director should be unincumbered with extraneous political baggage while taking leadership in those areas that allow science to function efficiently. Some issues would more appropriately be decided at other levels, keeping the NIH director, the National Science Foundation director, and other technical policy-makers apart from the political spoils system. The trade-off may be less scope in a general area for more power within the defined area.

The abortion question would be irrelevant to NIH were it not for fetal research. The use of fetal tissue has great promise not only in brain research, in AIDS research, and in the understanding of development in general, but also in the very survival of fetuses (see J. T. Hanzen and J. R. Sladek, Jr., *Science*, 10 Nov., p. 775). Some argue that research using aborted fetuses encourages abortions. Others argue that the ethical concerns about the use of aborted fetuses are the same as those debated about the use of organs for transplant. The NIH director must obey the law of the land and the policy set by the government; his private opinions need not enter into the abortion debate. The director of NIH, however, can and should be asked to evaluate professionally what the advantages and limitations of fetal research are and the ethical ways in which such research can be performed. A scientifically objective analysis may be important to reveal to other policy-makers what benefits would be abandoned by a ban on fetal research.

That the abortion issue has become so visible in our pluralistic society is perhaps inevitable. To some, life begins at fertilization and therefore abortion is immoral. Others are opposed to the birth of a child destined for a life of pain and misery. In a more homogeneous society, a mutually agreed upon moral code might be possible. In a melting pot society, a restrictive code can only be divisive. Some question who should bear financial responsibility for infants whose future was destined to be bleak. Others clamor to make abortion illegal under all circumstances. A compromise in which each group can follow its own moral code seems most appropriate, but the argument that fetal research should be held hostage to the debate about abortion makes little sense. The development of organ transplants does not mean that scientists are in favor of motor accidents. The same argument is true in the case of fetal research.

The important feature of the present situation is that a director for NIH will be chosen on the basis of scientific competence. Because of the publicity surrounding this appointment, the individual chosen will be scrutinized from all sides for his or her professionalism. It will serve everyone well to be able to say that the President never asked the candidates political questions, but only questions dealing with scientific competence and judgment. By stating those conditions well in advance, a great deal of difficulty and embarrassment will be averted, and this major research post can be filled by an individual whom all can respect.

—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.