House Bill Tells NIH to Stress Women

The House of Representatives last week pushed women's health issues to top priority when it passed the National Institutes of Health reauthorization bill. Among its initiatives, the bill would mandate: continued operation of the Office of Research in Women's Health as well as five contraceptive and infertility research centers, establishment of an obstetrics/gynecology research program, money for basic research on breast and ovarian cancers and osteoporosis, and continued efforts to recruit more women and minorities in clinical trials.

Celebrating their success is the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, a group of 156 members of Congress that first recommended the women's health provisions. Since such reauthorization bills come up only every few years, caucus spokeswoman Susan Wood points out that, if made into law, these thrusts are likely to last a while, even if NIH leadership passes to someone less concerned with women's issues.

But the celebration could be short-lived: The reauthorization bill must pass the Senate before it reaches the president's desk. And if there aren't some major changes, the bill will get a veto, says an official at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). In a letter to Congress, HHS Secretary Louis Sullivan recommended a veto, primarily because the bill lifts bans on the use of fetal tissue for research. But Sullivan also denounced the women's health provisions, calling them "costly and unnecessary." Moreover, he argued, NIH is already carrying out most of the bill's provisions.

Wood admits NIH is already attending to women's health, but she worries that the winds could shift. By writing women's issues into the bill, she says, the representatives mean to "establish priorities that cannot be changed."

Biotech Goes Batty

The vampire bat, never known as a great benefactor of humans, may someday help save people from heart attacks. Medical researchers at the Merck, Sharp & Dohme laboratories in West Point, Pennsylvania, have found that the same component of the bat's saliva that keeps the blood flowing when it bites its victims can also dissolve the blood clots responsible for heart attacks. The substance, which the researchers just isolated, opens clogged arteries twice as fast as the current substance of choice—tissue plasminogen activator, the key ingredient of Genentech's "clot-buster," Activase.

The results were published in the July issue of the journal *Circulation*. Not to be outdone, Genentech solved the structure of a protein from the venomous saliva of another scary creature, the Malayan pit viper snake. The snake's protein, known as kistrin, promises to speed the effectiveness of the company's own drug, Activase.

Both Merck and Genentech are searching for ways to specifically target damaging blood clots without also causing internal bleeding. The vampire bat protein may just fill that bill, says Merck scientist Stephen Gardell. Unlike many thrombolytic drugs, he says, "it restricts its activity to the area of the clot." There are some potential drawbacks, which will have to be overcome before vampire or viper proteins become standard therapy. For example, Merck researchers worry that use of a bat protein may cause unwanted immune reactions.

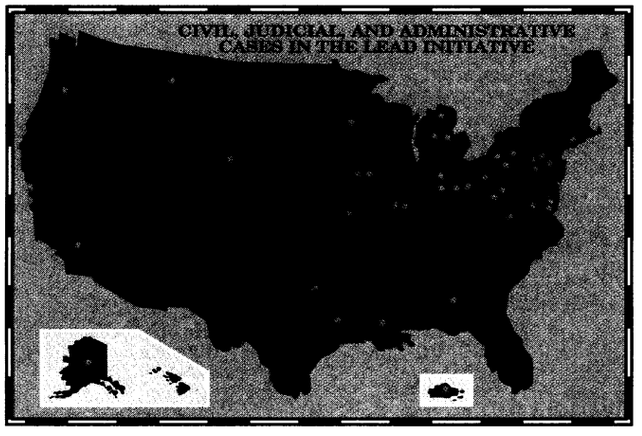
The researchers have already taken care of one hurdle: They won't have to collect the clot-busting protein from drooling bats—standard procedure until recently. Now researchers can introduce the gene coding for the desired anticoagulant into cultured cells, which manufacture it on demand.

Lead Polluters Get Punished

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Justice last week cracked down on 36 U.S. companies for polluting the environment with lead. EPA slapped fines totaling more than $10 million on 12 of the offending companies, and Justice filed 24 civil complaints.

Hank Habicht, deputy administrator of the EPA, said that his agency's initiative comes after 8 months of intense—and presumably successful—efforts at locating and documenting lead pollution in the soil, air, and water supply. Most feared has been lead's ability to damage the intellectual development of children. This caused the agency, Habicht said, to look beyond the usual suspect—lead in the water supply—to lead-laced dirt in residential areas. "Some kids eat dirt and we have to account for that," Habicht pointed out.

Meanwhile, the Department of Justice is using the EPA contamination data as well. Twenty U.S. attorneys have been assigned to pore over the federal environmental statutes, including the Clean Water Act and the Superfund Law, in order to file civil complaints. And this is just the beginning, said Assistant Attorney General Barry Hartman. "We will use every weapon available to us...to help the EPA get the lead out."



Better Tests for the Depressed

Cases of clinical depression present doctors with a nasty diagnostic challenge: The malady, which strikes about 10% of the population, comes in myriad forms, each requiring different treatments. Many sufferers can get help though, if at least a diagnostician can identify those with so-called endogenous depression—which usually can be treated with antidepressant drugs.

Enter the dexamethasone suppression test (DST). A biochemical assay, the DST recognizes endogenous depressive patients by a characteristic response of their blood level after administration of the test drug, dexamethasone. The main drawback: Because the physiology of each patient differs, the current sensitivity of the test misses 40% of those who could benefit from it.

But help may be on the way. At the National Meeting of Clinical Chemistry in Washington last week, James Ritchie of Duke University suggested combining DST with another assay, called the CRF challenging test, an approach he and collaborators in Germany are experimenting with. The CRF improves the odds by triggering release of a second brain chemical, ACTH. Says Ritchie: "Although the data are still somewhat preliminary, the combination of DST and CCT should improve the diagnosis of endogenous depression significantly."