

edited by RICHARD STONE

Brown Seeks New Allies in Pork Battle

It may soon become difficult for powerful congressmen to slip funds into appropriations bills for scientific projects that have not gone through full and open review, if congressional reformers have their way. Leading the reform effort is Representative George Brown (D-CA), chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, who has been waging an anti-pork campaign for more than a year (*Science*, 2 October, p. 22).

Radford Byerly, the science committee's chief of staff, said last week at an AAAS-sponsored meeting on the Clinton Administration that Brown is seeking allies among newly elected Demo-

crats to toughen the rules that govern how Congress allocates funds. Essentially, Brown is trying to persuade the Democratic Caucus to reinforce rules that permit appropriations committees to fund only items that have already been approved in authorization bills. The appropriations committees have been using procedural loopholes to slip pork into money bills.

"Authorizing committees [like the science committee] will be more powerful if we win," Byerly said, and "George Brown will have more power." The Democratic Caucus is expected to shepherd the rules—which would require new legislation—through Congress in the coming months.

U.S. and Russia Plan Joint Space Research

Officials from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and Russian scientists met in Moscow earlier this week to forge a research plan to study how the human body deals with extended periods of micro-gravity. These experiments would take place aboard the orbiting Mir space station. But one big question remains: Can the scientists do the work in the confines of Mir?

NASA officials say that the Mir research would augment scant knowledge about how the body's metabolism changes during weeks

in space. This new information would help NASA scientists anticipate problems with space station Freedom and enable them to plan for a manned trip to Mars sometime next century.

First, however, the scientists have to overcome Mir's technical constraints—a small volume and a lack of critical monitoring devices. One strategy is to refurbish Mir's present equipment, which includes an ultrasound machine, electrocardiograph, and blood analyzer, says Arnauld Nicogossian, NASA's chief medical officer. But NASA scientists are limited in what they can bring on Mir because its docking ports are only 80 centimeters wide.

Enter strategy number two. Russian scientists are designing a system that would allow their space shuttle to dock with Mir. Meanwhile, NASA and Rockwell scientists are drawing up plans to make U.S. space shuttles—which can carry a life sciences laboratory—compatible with the Mir's ports so that one of them could dock and perform more sophisticated research on astronauts aboard Mir. If tests go well, NASA will begin negotiating with the Russians early next year to purchase the docking system, says a NASA official.



MIKE ENGLISH/THE STOCK SHOP

Show of nerve. Neuroscientists join forces on animal drug testing.

That was good news, but it suddenly increased the workload for researchers looking for more potent drugs. They had to show that new products were at least as effective as MP in animals before they could ethically conduct trials in humans. Such testing requires thousands of animals to be injured and analyzed, a feat too burdensome for any single spinal cord lab, says neurosurgeon Wise Young of New York University Medical Center, who adds that "the whole field has been stymied."

Spinal Cord Researchers Unite

Like researchers in other hot disciplines, neuroscientists who study ways to combat spinal cord injuries have been splintered for years in competitive camps, each with its own animal models and treatment strategies. Now there are signs that the fractures in this field are being mended, thanks to an ambitious multicenter program for testing new drugs.

It all grew out of a discovery in 1990, when Yale scientists reported that methylprednisolone (MP), a steroid hormone, could reduce the extent of paralysis in patients if given within hours of an injury.

To resolve this impasse, nine of the nation's leading spinal cord injury centers this summer developed a standard model of an acute spinal cord injury in rats and a battery of tests for measuring a drug's efficacy. Now the labs can use a relatively small number of animals at each center and pool their results, accelerating the pre-clinical assessment of candidate drugs, says Young. He predicts that multicenter animal trials may enable drugs to enter clinical trials within 6 years—almost half the time it took MP to move from the lab to clinics.

Kessler Sees Reflections in Crystal Ball

The guessing game over who will head federal agencies has begun in earnest, now that President-elect Bill Clinton and his transition team are mulling over candidates for the next generation of top bureaucrats. A few spots, like the directorship of the National Science Foundation (NSF), held by Walter Massey, are considered by tradition to be nonpartisan, technical jobs whose holders don't bend to changes in the political winds. But that enviable status is not easy to achieve. Just ask David Kessler, commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

In a meeting with the staff of *Science* last week, Kessler said that the FDA is eager to be put in the same category as NSF. It "really needs not to be a partisan agency," said Kessler. "Once you're partisan or allow pressures to be exerted on you, the agency can't do its job."

Does this mean Kessler wants to stay on in the post he's held for the past 2 years? "You can't do this job if you want to stay," he demurs. "Once you like the job, you're dead." That's because the only way to resist the "pressures" on the agency, which regulates \$1 trillion worth of drugs and other products, is to be ready to resign, Kessler says.

Then does this mean that Kessler wants to leave the job? "I really have no comment on that," he answers. But he was happy to share his view on public service: "It's very important to come to [Washington, D.C.], but it's also very important to leave.... Otherwise, people start returning your phone calls, and you end up starting to think you're important." As *Science* went to press, Kessler's theory had not been put to the test: The Clinton Administration hadn't called.



SOVPHOTO

Mir trifles. Mir's cramped quarters make for tough science.