NIH DIRECTOR

Varmus Opposition Raises Anxieties

As *Science* went to press, many biomedical scientists were anxiously waiting for President Bill Clinton to make an open secret official: that Nobel laureate Harold Varmus will be Clinton's nominee for the next director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). But the Clinton White House has shown itself to be quite capable of caving in on important nominations to avoid messy confrontations. And last week, as hints of opposition to Varmus surfaced from some AIDS activists and others, biomedical research leaders began to wonder whether the White House could be backing away from Varmus, a molecular biologist at the University of California, San Francisco. That fear, prompted by the Administration's past behavior, led scientific organizations to begin peppering the White House with letters in a pro-Varmus campaign.

Their anxiety was triggered by the fact that they expected Varmus to be named in concert with previous NIH director Bernadine Healy's departure on 30 June. Instead, on 1 July, the Department of Health and Human Services quietly announced that Ruth Kirschstein, the head of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences since 1974, would step in as acting director.

But the anxiety about the supposed Varmus delay may well be misplaced, since the opposition to his nomination could have come too late to have an effect. According to a well-placed Administration source, the Varmus nomination is already "a done deal," having been approved by Clinton and sent to the government lawyers who stamp the final approval. Any delays at this stage, that source says, have nothing to do with political opposition and concern what was obscurely described as Varmus' "complicated finances."

Yet as late as last Friday, the biomedical community was deeply concerned about political opposition stemming largely from the fact that Varmus, a strong advocate of investigator-initiated basic research, lobbied against the congressional legislation that led to the reorganization of NIH's Office of AIDS Research (*Science*, 5 February, p. 753). The legislation, which was backed by the Clinton Administration, gave the Office of AIDS Research the power to direct how more than $1 billion is spent by the various NIH institutes on AIDS research each year.

And the biomedical researchers' fears weren't entirely misplaced. On June 25, San Francisco's Martin Delaney, founding director of the AIDS activist group Project Inform, wrote the White House that he was "gravely concerned" about the potential nomination of Varmus. Delaney cited "Dr. Varmus' apparent bias against the NIH conducting applied and targeted research." Delaney told *Science* that while scientists might be thrilled at the notion of Varmus tilting NIH more strongly toward basic research, in Delaney's view, the dedication to basic research without regard for specific clinical applications is a weakness, not a strength. Delaney's letter urged the White House to "stop and rethink" the appointment process.

Leading professional societies wasted no time in coming to the defense of Varmus' nomination. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) sent out a call on 1 July to its council of deans warning that Varmus was being opposed by the aging research community as well as by AIDS activists, and urging its members to telegram Clinton in his support. According to the AAMC, the aging community wanted the new NIH director to be from its fold to right what aging researchers perceive as the wrong done them by the recent appointment of an immunologist as director of the National Institute on Aging. What is more, leaders of several other biomedical research societies met last week in Bethesda, Maryland, to debate how best to support their candidate. Their efforts triggered telegrams or letters of support for Varmus from the American Society for Microbiology, the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, the American Society for Cell Biology, the American Physiological Society, and the American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics.

If the Varmus nomination proceeds as smoothly as the insiders say it will, this effort may turn out to have been unnecessary. Then again, perhaps even if Varmus is nominated, it will prove beneficial to him to have a powerful base of support among the scientific community, since the bumpy nominating process shows that he may have some vocal detractors waiting to greet him at his new office door.

–Jon Cohen

PUBLIC HEALTH

IOM Issues Vaccine Report

Vaccines are one of the most cost-effective disease-fighting tools ever devised by medicine. But not everything about vaccines is cheap. On the contrary, developing them is expensive: It can cost more than $200 million to bring a single vaccine product to market. What's more, because it is hard to make a good return on the investment, companies have little interest in developing vaccines against diseases that primarily affect people in poor countries. In a bold report issued last week, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommends that the United States government address these problems by establishing a National Vaccine Authority (NVA) with far-reaching powers to research, produce, and procure new and improved vaccines "of limited commercial potential but of global public health need."

The 221-page report, entitled "The Children's Vaccine Initiative: Achieving the Vision," was requested by the Agency for International Development and the Public Health Service to help sort out how the United States should contribute to the Children's Vaccine Initiative (CVI), an ambitious, international campaign launched 3 years ago that aims to immunize more of the world's children by catalyzing the development of better vaccines. Top priorities in developing countries are vaccines for malaria, shigella, salmonella, and dengue. Improved polio and measles vaccines are also deemed critical.

Development of such vaccines has been lagging, says Jay Sanford of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School and chair of the IOM committee. And one key bottleneck is the fragmented way vaccines are developed in the United States. Most U.S. research is concentrated "at one end" of the development process, said Sanford, "with limited attention or planning for desired vaccine use, procurement, or delivery strategies on the other." The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, for example, spends more than half of the $250 million the federal government allots to vaccine research but does not shepherd any vaccines through development.

The proposed vaccine authority would attempt to coordinate all phases of vaccine development by deciding which vaccines are most urgently needed; contracting with commercial companies for R&D; providing a manufacturing plant for pilot lots of new preparations; securing patent rights; and helping to pay for clinical trials. In all, the IOM estimates, the vaccine authority would cost $55 million to $75 million a year, as well as startup costs of up to $75 million.

The report does not address how this money would be raised. For the report's vision to become a reality, however, it would first need a sponsor in Congress to take the plan forward. And even if it should find one, legislative action this year is "doubtful," says a congressional staffer, because Congress has a limited appetite for vaccine bills and is already focusing on a domestic immunization package being pushed by President Bill Clinton.

–Jon Cohen