AIDS DRUG DEVELOPMENT

Task Force to Speed Drug Pipeline

It's been a tough year for AIDS researchers. Downbeat news, such as studies highlighting the limits of the anti-HIV drug AZT, has dominated. But while scientists struggle to master HIV, at least there has been some progress in mastering the bureaucratic obstacles to research: Ever more attention is being paid to sharing data, reducing red tape, and setting research priorities. And last week, the Clinton Administration took another step in that direction by announcing the formation of a high-level task force to speed development of new AIDS drugs.

The National Task Force on AIDS Drug Development was announced at a press conference at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on 30 November. "This is not just another government panel appointed to study an issue and write a report that will gather dust," asserts Donna Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services. The task force, an as-yet-unnamed group of 15 representatives from government, industry, academia, and AIDS-affected communities, will "identify and remove any barriers or obstacles to developing effective treatments," according to Shalala.

Shalala's claim was backed up by some big guns at the press conference. She was flanked by assistant secretary of health Philip Lee, who will head the new group, NIH Director Harold Varmus, Food and Drug Administration commissioner David Kessler, White House AIDS policy coordinator Kristine Gebbie, Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and representatives from drug companies and the AIDS activist community.

Although few specifics were presented, Kessler, who was instrumental in forming the task force, told *Science* that one of the organization's major missions will be to fill a gap by ensuring that drug companies, the government, scientists, and activists work together in exploring combination therapies for AIDS. "I'm not convinced that kind of overview is happening," says Kessler. He thinks the reason is the parochial interests of individual research organizations. "If I'm company A," he says, "I'm pushing my data."

Fauci says one obstacle the panel might look into is fear among some in industry of collaborating with government. "Some pharmaceutical companies have a knee-jerk reaction to open participation with the federal government," says Fauci. Current regulations on such participation require that companies allow the government a lot of decision-making power, and companies don't like that at all. "We've got to ask the industry to give the government a fair amount of control of their products," Fauci says. "More often than not, their reaction is, 'Who needs you?' We need to put that on the table."

The task force idea builds on a drug company collaboration launched last April by Merck & Co.'s president of research, Edward Scolnick. That group of 15 companies is attempting to streamline the AIDS drug development process by sharing early data and standardizing assays (*Science*, 23 April, p. 482). But this inter-company collaboration is for industry eyes only, and Scolnick sees the new government task force as having a special responsibility to bring research findings to patients in record time. "If there's any kind of breakthrough, this task force will see that everything is done like lightning," says Scolnick.

Although all of this sounds rosy, not everyone was buying the bouquet. Some AIDS activists in the audience were not impressed: ACT UP of Washington, D.C., called the task force a "hoax" and an "empty gesture." The group's members—one of whom confronted Shalala at the press conference—want an all-out search for an AIDS cure styled after the Manhattan Project that led to the atomic bomb. This was a Clinton campaign promise (*Science*, 19 February, p. 1112) that hasn't materialized, and activists charge that the panel is a paltry substitute for that kind of major federal effort.

Other influential AIDS activists, however, including Derek Hodel of the AIDS Action Council and Moises Agosto of the National Minority AIDS Council are backing the panel idea. And Lee insists that the task force is far from window dressing. "If this mechanism doesn't prove a fruitful way to proceed within 2 years, then I'll say, 'Why go on with it?'" says Lee. "I'm not interested in symbolism." The task force is expected to hold its first meeting by March.

–Jon Cohen

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

A new force. HHS Secretary Donna Shalala and assistant secretary Philip Lee announced a task force to streamline AIDS drug development.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Failing to Cross the Biology-Culture Gap

Anthropologists are trained to bridge the gaps between different cultures. But today many American anthropologists find themselves divided by one of those very gaps—and are having a tough time spanning the chasm. Their discipline has become polarized into two tribes—one oriented toward biology, the other toward culture—who seem unable or unwilling to understand one another.

The breadth of the chasm became clear last month at the American Anthropological Association's (AAA) annual meeting in Washington, D.C., during two symposia intended, in part, to illuminate any common ground between the two sides. If it existed, however, it was hard to spot. Today biological researchers search for evolutionary and physiological bases for social behavior, while cultural investigators are busy deconstructing cultural texts and trends according to postmodern lights. AAA president Annette Weiner of New York University, who arranged the meetings, is concerned that the disciplinary gap will continue to widen, with cultural anthropology becoming an "adjunct" of the highly politicized field of cultural studies, while biological anthropologists find "more supportive homes in other departments or in medical schools."

The biological crew, for their part, did seem eager for a rapprochement. At a symposium on "Biological anthropologists without anthropology," they spoke earnestly of the need to integrate their work with the rest of the field. But there was little evidence that the feeling is mutual. In a symposium on cultural anthropology, science got scarcely a mention—except as another culture to be studied. And not necessarily sympathetically. "A form of cognitive colonialism" is how Mario Biagioli, historian of science at the University of California, Los Angeles, described the biological approach.

That kind of talk among cultural anthropologists has biological anthropologists feeling "a little alienation mixed with a lot of bewilderment," said primate biologist Clifford Jolly of New York University. The alienation, at least, is not new. The field has traditionally viewed biological anthropology as ancillary to its main business: the study of culture. But after successive waves of new theory and practice—sociobiology, behavioral genetics, and the revolution in molecular biology—biological anthropologists have