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Risky business. Bill to beef up risk assessment may help EPA gain long-sought promotion.

EPA Risk Bill May End Cabinet Impasse

Plans to elevate the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to department status, which have been sidelined since last year, may get back on track in Congress this month.

Last May, qualms about the EPA's ability to assess and compare health risks derailed a bill supported by the White House to promote EPA administrator Carol Browner and her agency to Cabinet rank. Now, after months of wrangling, Congress may have a solution: Compromise legislation that would strengthen EPA's risk-assessment policy.

The original "EPA cabinet" bill was chugging along just fine until last May, when Senator Bennett Johnston (D–LA) tacked on an amendment that would require EPA to conduct a risk assessment, including a cost-benefit analysis, on every proposed agency regulation. EPA officials decried the amendment as too costly and prescriptive, but it passed nearly unanimously. The White House then cooled to the cabinet bill.

Enter Representative Herb Klein (D–NJ), with an idea that may yet give EPA the promotion it seeks. Klein told *Science* he's concerned that EPA is failing to address some risks and is "devoting enormous resources to other [risks] in an inefficient way." To help draft a risk bill, Klein solicited input from 120 organizations, including EPA, industry, and environmental groups. The proposal would create an EPA office to develop and oversee risk-assessment guidelines. It would also establish a pilot program for comparing risks from disparate sources, necessary for any attempt to prioritize spending.

If the risk-assessment bill wins broad support, passing the Cabinet bill becomes a much easier task, says a House staffer. His optimism springs in part from the fact that Karen Thurman (D–FL)—who in February had sought to tack a Johnston-like amendment to the House cabinet bill—is cosponsoring the Klein bill, which is scheduled for mark-up later this month.

Controversial Therapy Loses Spokesperson

Boosters of boron neutron capture therapy (BNCT)—a controversial approach to treating patients with inoperable brain tumors—have lost their most visible advocate, but the damage to their cause may run deeper: The advocate should never have received BNCT in the first place.

In 1991, Dolores Rae Irons was diagnosed with an almost-invariably fatal brain tumor known as a glioblastoma multiforme. The Floridian went to Japan to receive boron-neutron radiation at Teikyo University, which is the world's only facility offering BNCT. A year later Irons had apparently recovered, and she began lobbying on behalf of the Idaho-based BNCT University Consortium. Her support helped the group win a $4-million congressional earmark last year for BNCT research.

Now the consortium is lobbying Congress for more cash, but without Irons—she died of cancer last month. However, in a sentence buried in prepared testimony for a Senate hearing earlier this week—but not distributed to the public—the consortium revealed that Irons never had a brain tumor. A medical review last year determined she had a lymphoma that had spread to the central nervous system, which had been misdiagnosed as a glioblastoma. Irons, therefore, received the wrong therapy, says Tufts BNCT researcher Robert Zamenhof.

The revelation isn't slowing the consortium, which has cited other BNCT successes. At the Senate hearing it asked Congress for $300,000 this year and $6 million in 1995 for BNCT research. The consortium also wants the Department of Energy to convert reactors at either the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory or Georgia Tech for BNCT purposes so it can begin clinical trials.

COURANT INSTITUTE

Frugal Scientist Wins Windfall

Theoretical mathematicians sometimes must scrape by with only pennies for their thoughts. But not Gang Tian, a 35-year-old specialist in differential geometry at New York University's Courant Institute. Tian has just won $500,000 over 3 years from the National Science Foundation (NSF), more than enough money to oil the only research tool he needs—his brain.

Earlier this week NSF announced that Tian has won the agency's biggest prize: The Alan T. Waterman Award for young scientists. For scientists in other fields, a cool half million might barely cover equipment costs. But for Tian—whom the head of NSF's math division, Fred Wan, calls "possibly the best geometer of his generation"—the money is an embarrassment of riches. Tian already has a regular NSF grant, which pays him $25,000 a year for 5 years, and he's completing a Sloan fellowship of $30,000 over 2 years. That's enough to cover the scant computing time Tian requires, as well as his travel costs to math conferences. So how does Tian plan to spend his award? On a 24-carat gold protractor? No, Tian says he'll use most of the money to hire postdocs to explore mathematical questions he doesn't have time for.

Panel Calls for NIH Intramural Overhaul

Despite its "distinguished" record, in-house research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is destined for a "mediocre future"—unless certain problems are addressed, says a blue-ribbon panel of advisers to NIH director Harold Varmus. The external advisory board, chaired by microbiologist Gail Cassell of the University of Alabama, Birmingham, and Paul Marks, president of the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, has sent the final draft of its report to Varmus, who was expected to disclose the findings earlier this week.

The panel raises concerns of academic scientists, many of which were aired last year in this journal (*Science*, 27 August 1993, p. 1120). The report, to be discussed in more detail next week in *Science*, urges the following measures:

- Establish uniform, high standards of review across all intramural research programs and create a board to monitor the review process.
- Make institute scientific directors more accountable to outside review; ensure the independence of boards of scientific counselors.
- Set formal procedures for awarding tenure to young scientists and avoid trapping them in narrow roles within senior-investigator "fiefdoms."
- Improve training programs so that young scientists acquire broad expertise; link training with minority recruitment.
- Limit the size of the intramural program to the present share (11.3%) of the NIH budget; make the intramural budget planning process more open.
- Build a new Clinical Center as a 250-bed facility rather than the present 420-bed hospital. Renovate research lab space as the budget permits.
- Improve technology transfer and procurement procedures.
- Seek to revoke a rule that is forcing NIH to cut personnel by 2500 over the next 5 years.