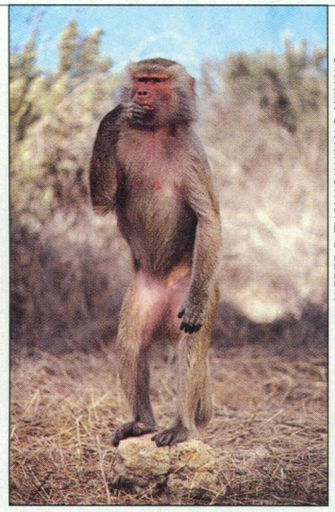
edited by RICHARD STONE

NIH to Reward Top Scientists

National Institutes of Health (NIH) lab chiefs are bracing for another tough year of fiscal restraint, but they'll also be getting some good news. According to NIH Director Harold Varmus, some long-expected reforms in pay and pension rules will help NIH recruit and retain top scientists.

Although Varmus is uncertain just "when the flag goes down," he says he's already been told by the Administration that NIH can prepare to offer jobs within the new Senior Biomedical Research Service (SBRS). Congress approved this package of pay raises and other incentives in 1990, but the SBRS has been tangled in reviews ever since. At last, Varmus says, both the White House and the Department of Health and Human Services have agreed that SBRS—which could include up to 300 scientists—should become a reality in a matter of weeks.

This system's main advantage, says NIH's Stephen Benowitz, is flexibility: SBRS members will be eligible for merit raises not tied to civil-service tenure—up to a top salary of $148,000. In addition, new SBRSers belonging to private pension funds like TIAA-CREF will be allowed to continue using such funds.



ALFRED B. THOMAS/ANIMALS ANIMALS

Organ grinder or donor? FDA to warn physicians of potential risks of animal-to-human transplants.

FDA Airs Qualms Over Xenotransplants

Renewed interest in transplanting animal organs into people is causing consternation at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), where officials plan to issue a warning that could slow clinical trials set to begin this year. The FDA's concern: "Xenografts" might allow dangerous pathogens lurking in animals to jump to humans.

Following recent successes in animal studies, transplant surgeons are girding for new clinical trials this year. For example, surgeons at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center have asked their review board for permission to transplant baboon hearts into babies until compatible human hearts are found (*Science*, 18 November 1994, p. 1148).

Transplant teams acknowledge that their experiments entail some degree of risk—after all, the AIDS virus may have originated in African monkeys. To reduce the threat of unleashing pathogens, they plan to test animals for known viruses and monitor transplant recipients for symptoms of infectious disease.

But screening for known viruses does little to apprehend novel pathogens. So FDA officials want stricter safeguards that could include improved tests for pathogens, protocols to quarantine patients, and the creation of colonies of "clean" animals.

FDA has the muscle to demand such provisions, says Philip Noguchi, director of FDA's division of cell and gene therapy. But for now, he says, the agency only plans to alert surgeons, health officials, and review boards to xenograft risks. However, FDA may change its laissez-faire attitude if xenografts take off. In that case, Noguchi says, FDA may mandate new safety rules on the procurement of animal organs.

Republican Bucks Basic Research Trend

The new Republican chair of the House panel that oversees basic research is echoing some distinctly Democratic themes. Representative Steven Schiff (R–NM), tapped on 20 December to head the subcommittee, told *Science* he plans to lean on federal agencies to direct basic research efforts toward concrete goals.

Schiff, who backed the Superconducting Super Collider and the planned space station, insists he supports basic research. However, he says, "I want more programs that can demonstrate practical results." Schiff argues that "government [-sponsored] research should be more goal-oriented," and he wants grants to universities to reflect that.

Steven Schiff

Such views echo those of many Democrats, including Senate science maven Barbara Mikulski (D–MD). "It's a welcome tonic to what we've been hearing so far," says a House aide for the Democrats.

Indeed, Schiff's ideas may put him at odds with his Republican kin. For example, Representative Robert Walker (R–PA), the chair of the full Science Committee that subsumes Schiff's panel, has vowed to shift federal dollars from applied to basic research (*Science*, 23 December 1994, p. 1938). Schiff says he has not spoken in detail with Walker about their disparate views.

Schiff's panel will oversee an arena that includes the National Science Foundation, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, science education, university science policy, and energy research. The latter will draw much of Schiff's attention: He plans to scrutinize the Department of Energy's proposed budget cuts, which he says could harm basic research. Of course, his constituents would expect no less: Schiff represents the Albuquerque area, home to Energy's Sandia National Lab.

Battle Looms Over Risk Assessment

Lost amid the hubbub over orphanages and welfare reform is a low-profile part of the Republican's "Contract-With-America" legislation that foreshadows a battle over how federal agencies should do research. The Contract's "Job Creation and Wage Enhancement Act" calls on regulatory agencies to beef up their assessments of health and environmental risks, presumably by diverting resources from their research budgets. But the White House is gearing up to fight the legislation and plans to issue its own policy paper on risk to "educate" members of Congress.

Democrats and Republicans have sparred repeatedly over how agencies can improve efforts to assess the risk of everything from pesticides to radon. Republican-sponsored bills in the past 2 years have aimed to force the Environmental Protection Agency and other agencies to perform cost-benefit analyses on proposed regulations as well as prioritize spending by ranking risks. Democrats have countered with legislation that would beef up risk research and develop guidelines for conducting assessments (*Science*, 6 May 1994, p. 763). So far, however, the only bill to become law is one that created a risk-assessment office at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Now Republicans plan to push a bill that would require agencies to carry out cost-benefit analyses and compare disparate risks. "We're not dictating how agencies do science—systematic analysis is what we're talking about," says Nandan Kenkeremath, counsel to the House Energy and Commerce committee.

The White House, which has been virtually silent on the issue, is about to jump into the fray. It's preparing two documents: a guide to risk-research needs and a policy statement that sources say echoes last year's Democrat-sponsored legislation. "Congress has to be aware that if risk assessments are going to be useful, industry or someone else will have to develop more data," says Mark Schaefer of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, who says the policy paper is slated for release later this month.