



LABORATORY OF CANCER GENETICS/NIH

Ethics questions. Chromosome 1 in this image symbolizes question mark over the genome program.

Congressman Ties Genome Bucks to Ethics

Representative David Obey (D-WI) put the National Institutes

of Health (NIH) on notice that he's scrutinizing their efforts to prevent the misuse of information from the human genome project—and that he'll try to freeze the genome program's \$153 million budget if officials don't move fast enough.

"I am very reluctant to put more money into [human genome research] until I am convinced ... that the best minds in science and law are focused on getting up to speed on how to handle this information," Obey, ranking minority member of the House appropriations subcommittee that oversees NIH's budget, said at a hearing last week on NIH's 1996 budget request.

With the Republicans in charge, Obey doesn't have the power he once wielded as chair of the appropriations panel. But his

threat still alarmed Francis Collins, director of NIH's National Center for Human Genome Research, who had already told the panel that a task force to recommend safeguards for genetic testing is set to meet in 2 weeks for the first time. In light of a ruling earlier this month by the Equal Opportunities Commission declaring genetic discrimination illegal, Collins estimated it will take about 2 years to establish ethical standards and legal protection.

Obey may not want to wait that long. Currently, only six states prohibit employers or insurance firms from discriminating against a person genetically predisposed to a disease. If NIH is still debating the issue in 2 years, Obey warned, the government just might decide to stop funding the genome center altogether.

N.Y. Budget a Downer For Psychiatric Science

Psychiatric researchers in New York are making a last-ditch attempt to forestall proposed cuts in the state's budget that would drastically shrink its contribution to Columbia University's venerated Psychiatric Institute (PI). The cuts would force the institute to eliminate dozens of research jobs.

PI, the oldest psychiatric research outfit in the country, is renowned for pioneering contributions such as the use of lithium to treat manic depression. "PI is one of the truly great intellectual resources in mental health research in the world," says Jack Barchas, chair of psychiatry at Cornell Medical Center.

But now, as part of his campaign pledge to shrink government, Republican Governor George Pataki has proposed cutting \$4 million this year from New York State's \$27 million payment to PI. Such a cut would wipe out 80 state-supported jobs and cripple PI's ability to attract grants, which last year totaled \$47 million. In a statement, PI officials said the cuts would kill off at least 150 grant-supported research and clinical jobs. Down the road, this brain drain might hobble New York's fledgling efforts to attract biotech firms specializing in neuroscience, says Herbert Pardes, chair of psychiatry at Columbia.

Psychiatric research at three other New York institutes would also suffer from a 7.5% decrease in the state's \$1.7 billion mental health budget, as state officials are forced to choose between research and services. "We have to consider our primary responsibility, which is providing treatment," says a spokesperson for the state Office of Mental Health.

Researchers aren't going down quietly, however. Aides to state legislators say that they have received hundreds of letters of protest from U.S. and foreign scientists. The legislature's final vote on the budget could come as early as this weekend.

EPA Gives Science Adviser More Clout

In an effort to give science a stronger voice in decisions at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Administrator Carol Browner has chosen EPA research chief Robert Huggett to be her science adviser.

Browner's predecessor, William Reilly, created the post in 1992 after an outside panel criticized EPA for frequently ignoring scientific advice. But Reilly's appointee, William Raub, who was acting director of the National

Institutes of Health before coming to EPA, has been excluded from Browner's inner circle. Only last week, a National Research Council report criticized EPA for failing to give its science adviser more authority (see Random Samples, p. 1903).

The move, to be announced shortly, is expected to breathe new life into the position. Huggett will develop a strategic plan for scientific activities to be imple-

mented by EPA's Science Policy Council. "Huggett has the stature within the agency to do this,"

says EPA Deputy Administrator Fred Hansen, chair of the newly energized council. "I see the council as now being the key place for making science policy decisions," Hansen says.

Raub will remain at EPA to head a group of research labs. As for Huggett, he says, "I've never felt I've had a lack of clout with Carol."



Robert Huggett

False Start for White House Panel

Time is of the essence, presidential science adviser John Gibbons said on 26 January in announcing a high-level task force to study how to give states a larger role in the national research and development enterprise. "The task force needs to work quickly," said Gibbons, who had hoped to have a report within 90 days, "to influence policies relating to the [1996] budget" now before Congress.

There's no chance that the task force will meet Gibbons's deadline, however, because it hasn't even been appointed yet. Indeed, the panel may never get off the ground in the form that Gibbons had envisioned originally.

What's the hang-up? One prosaic problem was that Gibbons announced the White House task force prematurely, at a symposium marking the release of a

report on state-federal partnerships (*Science*, 10 February, p. 779). Federal ethics rules have also crimped Gibbons's time line, as White House officials realized belatedly that it would take months to vet members of a presidentially appointed panel.

The compromise solution, to be announced shortly, is a 20-member panel of university presidents, past and present state officials, and corporate leaders, appointed by the National Governors Association, who will meet in public and issue a preliminary report by the end of July. Federal officials have pledged the full cooperation of the interagency National Science and Technology Council, as well as promising that any suggestions will fall on sympathetic ears. However, a midsummer report may arrive too late to have much influence on the current budget deliberations.