

Smokers to Foot NIH Funding Boost?

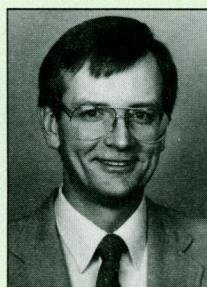
When health care reform died last fall, it took down with it a bold scheme to pay for biomedical research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) through a trust fund based on insurance taxes. No one has tried to revive the insurance tax, but an entirely new scheme for funding medical research has now surfaced in Congress, proposed by Pete Stark (D-CA) and 10 other legislators. The result could be a windfall for NIH: more than \$1 billion a year in new money.

In a bill introduced on 6 April (H.R. 1455), Stark and Utah Republican James Hansen have proposed to increase the federal excise tax on tobacco, specifically targeting cigarettes, which they would hit with a duty of \$2 a pack. The main objective, Stark says, is to discourage children from starting to smoke—a habit that causes more than 400,000 U.S. deaths a year. The secondary goals are to generate income for Medicare, to fund health research and education, and to aid farmers who want to switch from tobacco to other crops.

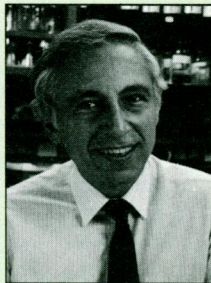
The plan calls for 88% of the tax revenue to support Medicare's hospital insurance fund, 9% to "augment the resources" of NIH, 1.5% to fund farm conversion, and 1.5% to pay for public education on health risks. Stark calculates that the tax would initially bring in about \$17 billion a year, of which \$1.5 billion would go into a "national fund for medical research ... to expand our understanding and ability to deal with complex medical problems."

The proposal has won favor among biomedical lobbyists: "The troops are getting ready to move" to support it, says Marguerite Donoghue of the National Coalition for Cancer Research. But it faces an uphill battle, including a "no new taxes" policy declared by Robert Packwood (R-OR) in the Senate and tough opposition from tobacco-state legislators such as Thomas Bliley (R-VA) in the House.

The Dream Team?



William Blattner



Robert C. Gallo



Robert Redfield

A Movable Institute: The AIDS Dream Team

Dream teams are all the rage these days, and now AIDS research may have one of its own—led by none other than the National Cancer Institute's (NCI's) Robert Gallo.

Gallo, the battle-scarred virologist whose lab first showed that HIV causes AIDS, is shopping his CV along with those of NCI epidemiologist William Blattner and clinician Robert Redfield of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. Gallo's aim is to head a new Institute of Human Virology, with Blattner handling population biology research, Redfield overseeing the

clinical work, and Gallo running a lab. They are negotiating with the Medical University of South Carolina, the University of Virginia, the University of Maryland, and an unrevealed institution in Philadelphia.

Gallo pledges that his version of a dream team—which is being courted by everyone from university officials to Maryland's governor—will make its mark in AIDS. "I want to get into this up to my elbows," he says. "Nothing is going to distract from what I've been interested in doing for a long time—better therapies and vaccine development." Gallo expects to select a home for the Dream Team by the end of April.

Department of Science Still Evolving

When he was a minority member of the House Science Committee, Representative Robert Walker (R-PA) was quick to snipe at proposals from the ruling Democrats. Now that he's the chair, his own ideas—including a grand strategy to unify the federal science bureaucracy—are under attack, and Walker appears to be taking the criticism to heart.

At issue is draft legislation to merge several research agencies into a Department of Science (*Science*, 31 March, p. 1900). Administration officials and several leading scientists oppose the plan; they argue it would be a bad idea to detach research from the missions of the agencies—space, energy, the environment—now footing the bill.

Last week at a press conference, Walker said he never intended to create a "science czar" and that "diversity was good for science." Rather than isolating science, he said, his bill would simply make it more efficient. "If you allow several programs to join together [in a Department of Science] and at the same time work with other departments, then you get the best of both worlds," he explained.

Whatever Walker decides to do, he probably won't involve the National Institutes of Health. NIH doesn't belong in the new department because "I don't think that there is much at NIH that blends in" with the work of other science agencies, he said, citing patient care as an example. Asked for a timetable, Walker said he will wait until House Republicans unveil their plan to reorganize government as part of a budget resolution due by 15 May.

Congressman Uncovers The HIV Conspiracy

Last fall's elections ushered in a slew of politicians eager to reinvent government—and at least one who appears earnest about reinventing medical dogma on the cause of AIDS.

In a 24 March letter sent to eight government scientists and officials who influence AIDS research and policies, freshman Representative Gil Gutknecht (R-MN) questions the "HIV = AIDS hypothesis and its inability to come up with a cure, vaccine or effective treatment." His query echoes the arguments of Peter Duesberg, the University of California, Berkeley, retrovirologist who insists HIV is harmless (*Science*, 9 December 1994, p. 1642). For instance, Gutknecht's "initial inquiry" asks whether recreational drug use and anti-HIV drugs might be the true cause of AIDS and questions whether AIDS is contagious.

Gutknecht's staffers think they're on to something. The federal AIDS effort—based on the conclusion that HIV causes AIDS—"will be seen as the greatest scandal in American history and will make Watergate look like a no-fault divorce," croons Gutknecht's senior legislative assistant, Brian Harte, who claims to be the "impetus" for his boss's drumbeating.

Federal officials declined to comment on the substance of Gutknecht's letter. They are now coordinating a response, says National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci. Besides Fauci, other recipients included the heads of the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Harte says he is "waiting for their less-than-truthful answers." In the event the response reflects the views of the scientific community, Harte says Gutknecht will press for hearings by the House basic research subcommittee, which Gutknecht sits on.