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EDITORIAL

Biomedical Research: A Vital Investment

We are now halfway through the "Decade of the Brain," an appropriate time to applaud the progress we have made in neurological research and to consider the promise the future holds for additional breakthroughs.

In the past 5 years, we have produced new medications for the treatment of multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, and migraine headaches. We have identified several genes that cause hereditary blindness and deafness, and produced a drug that reduces the craving for alcohol. To aid victims of brain trauma and spinal injury, researchers are slowly uncovering drugs that may help regenerate nerve cells, a feat previously thought impossible. Already the first generation of these chemicals has meant the difference between wheelchairs and crutches for some spinal injury victims.

The progress realized in the first 5 years of the Decade of the Brain is indicative of what we can achieve in the next 5 years and beyond. The pace of these advances is virtually doubling our knowledge every 10 years, and there is every reason to believe that this will continue—if support for research does not diminish.

As chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, I am keenly interested in the three drivers of biomedical research—the government, private companies, and patient advocates—and especially in biomedical research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), an institution that is a U.S. national treasure. Yet in November 1994, our country voted for a smaller and more accountable government. We have an overriding responsibility to move as quickly as reasonably possible to the point where we, not our children and grandchildren, are paying for what we get from government. Because my subcommittee must contribute its fair share to deficit reduction as well as foster the well-being of NIH, how can we reconcile the two priorities?

As this Congress moves to streamline government, the challenge facing every subcommittee will be to review each line item to determine whether and to what extent proposed spending can be justified. Looking at every federal program, department, and agency under my subcommittee's jurisdiction, I must ask: How high a priority is biomedical research at NIH? The answer: There is hardly a more vital endeavor. It produces treatments to combat disease and injury, helping people live longer, healthier lives. On the economic side, the United States leads the world in biomedical research and development. Federally supported biomedical research creates high-skill jobs and supports an industry that generates a growing economy and a positive balance of trade for our country (a concept that, as I remind my majority colleagues, is quintessentially Republican). In addition, the total costs associated with NIH since its inception have been more than paid for in terms of health care savings from just one discovery. And there have been thousands. The payback is tremendous.

Some would ask, can't this research be done in the private sector? The answer, frankly, is no. The federal government funds basic research; private industry applies it. It is a potent sequential partnership. And yet the message about the benefits of federally funded research is not being heard by policy-makers and the public, or by the House and Senate budget committees that recommended cuts in the NIH budget. In my opinion, these proposed cuts would be disastrous. Award rates would drop, young researchers would choose other careers, and momentum and potential successes would be lost.

We must get the message out that biomedical research at NIH is worthy of our continued support. This research is not done in a vacuum but touches everyone. The cost to society if we retrench is incalculable. We will never be able to measure the lost and destroyed lives, nor the brilliant minds who have selected other fields to pursue, nor the lost opportunity for U.S. leadership.

I call on citizens across the United States to join doctors, scientists, and clinicians in speaking out to preserve our government's role in biomedical research. If we send that message, the tremendous progress we've seen will continue. If we don't, we risk stopping that progress in its tracks. It's a risk we cannot afford.

John Edward Porter

Congressman John Edward Porter (R–IL) is serving his ninth term in the U.S. House of Representatives. He is a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee and chairman of the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Subcommittee.