

Merck to Fund Black Biomedical Students

A major corporation has decided to do something about the dearth of African Americans in science. Earlier this week, the pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co. announced that it will donate \$20 million to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) to pay for 370 fellowships for black students in biomedical sciences.

Over the past 17 years, a mere 1057 of 46,569 doctorate degrees (2.2%) in biology and chemistry have been awarded to African Americans, who comprise 12% of the U.S. population. To try to bring more minority students into biomedicine, the Merck fund each year for the next decade will provide stipends to 15 college seniors, 12 grad students, and 10 postdocs. The awards range from \$15,000 for undergrads to \$40,000 for postdocs. Each award comes with \$10,000 to \$15,000 for the host institution. UNCF will solicit applications later this summer for the first round of awards.

The program could be especially important at the postdoc level, where African Americans are few and far between, says Shirley McBay of the Quality Education for Minorities Network. However, McBay notes, attracting blacks to science also requires better educational opportunities in middle and high schools—an age group the fund does not target.



DAVID RYAN/PHOTO

Risky business. Senate bill gives agencies some latitude for assessing risks to vulnerable groups such as subsistence fishers.

Senate May Strengthen Science in Risk Bill

Four months after the House ground out a controversial bill that would overhaul how federal agencies evaluate the risks of toxic chemicals and other hazards, the Senate earlier this week began debating a version of the legislation that may prove more palatable to scientists.

Spurred by the Republican "Contract with America" pledge to revamp regulations onerous to industry, the House passed a bill in February that would require agencies to assess risks using all available scientific data and conduct cost-benefit analyses of proposed regulations. Many scientists who conduct risk assessments criticized a section of the bill that calls for a "best estimate or estimates" of risk. Calculating a best estimate, they argue, would force assessments to be generalized for entire populations, rather

than being tailored to high-risk groups such as pregnant women or subsistence fishers who eat polluted fish (*Science*, 24 February, p. 1089).

The Senate's version of the risk bill, a substitute amendment to Robert Dole's S 343 introduced on 30 June, scraps the best estimate clause.

Instead, the Dole bill calls for an assessment of "the reasonably expected risk to the general population and, where appropriate, to more highly exposed or sensitive subpopulations." A staffer on the Senate Republican Policy Committee says the new language will leave agencies better equipped to defend the science behind a regulation if it is challenged in court.

The Senate bill is a step in the right direction, as far as the White House is concerned. "The language appears to be an improvement," says Mark Schaefer of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. However, Schaefer and others say the bill needs to state that agencies should protect high-risk populations.

The Dole bill is expected to be voted on by the end of next week. A House-Senate conference to resolve differences in the two versions is expected to take place by the end of the month.

U.K. Science to Play 2nd Fiddle to Industry?

The British government has given science a demotion, leaving many U.K. researchers shellshocked. The bomb dropped last week, when Prime Minister John Major relocated the Office of Science and Technology (OST), which through its research councils controls the U.K.'s \$1.9 billion annual budget for academic science. Major shifted OST from the Cabinet Office to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

Ironically, Major had won praise from British scientists 3 years ago for pulling science funding decisions out of the Department of Education and creating the OST within the Cabinet Office, where a new science minister could influence policy across all departments. But with the move to DTI, the science office has lost its independent ministerial voice.

The reshuffle builds an empire for Michael Heseltine, who as deputy prime minister now holds many of the Cabinet posts of the former science minister, David Hunt. In a decision supported by Heseltine but surprising to researchers, Major shifted responsibility for OST to the new trade and industry secretary, Ian Lang. The government said the move will allow Lang to coordinate science and industrial policy.

The move has raised fears among scientists that basic science may take a back seat to the short-term needs of industry. The reason: One of the DTI's main missions is to encourage industrial R&D. "The OST has lost all independent influence," says John Mulvey of the lobby group Save British Science. "No one in the scientific community appears to have been consulted."

Sir John Cadogan, director general of OST's research councils, wrote to colleagues assuring them it would be "business as usual" and that OST's functions "will be ring-fenced from other parts of the DTI." However, says Mulvey, "if it's business as usual, it's hard to see why the changes have been made."

Top Scientists Come to Defense of AIDS Research Office

The fight over how to direct the federal AIDS research budget is being played out again this summer, with AIDS researchers trying to persuade Congress to retain an arrangement it set up only 2 years ago.

Scientists are reacting to a plan by John Porter (R-IL), chair of the House appropriations subcommittee that oversees the National Institutes of Health, to rescind authority given the Office of AIDS Research (OAR) to direct how NIH spends \$1.3 billion a year on AIDS research. Although NIH institute directors initially opposed ceding power to OAR, arguing it was an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy, they now say they support the beefed-up office.

Leading the battle to preserve OAR's power is Princeton's Arnold Levine, who chairs a working group recently set up by NIH Director Harold Varmus and

OAR chief William Paul to evaluate AIDS research. In a 30 June letter to Porter, Levine contended that budget authority is "critical to the future of AIDS research" because it will allow OAR to act on the recommendations of his working group. "No other mechanism will allow the elimination of unnecessary or outdated programs, streamline the research portfolios, and redirect limited resources to those areas with greater scientific promise..." he stated.

Seconding Levine's concerns was David Baltimore of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who wrote Porter "it pains me to hear that there is a move to undo the process just when it is getting into gear."

Despite Porter's clout as chair, AIDS activists and researchers vow to continue their campaign as the proposal moves through the full House.