

## NOBEL PRIZES

# Newspaper Backs Down Over Allegations of Impropriety

Swedish researchers reacted with a mixture of relief and puzzlement last week when the country's most influential newspaper issued what is being widely viewed as a partial retraction of a sensational series of articles attacking the integrity of the awarding of a Nobel Prize. The newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, shocked the scientific community early this month with a front-page story, followed by three further articles on subsequent days, claiming that the Italian pharmaceutical company Fidia had undertaken a "gigantic campaign" during the 1980s to ensure that the Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine would go to Italian-born neurobiologist Rita Levi-Montalcini, by raising her profile and awarding grants and prizes to members of the Nobel committee.

The paper singled out prominent Swedish neurobiologist Tomas Hökfelt as one of those who had received gifts from Fidia. But after nearly 2 weeks of intense criticism from Swedish and overseas scientists, *Dagens Nyheter* suddenly backed down. In an editorial published on 15 September, the paper's editor-in-chief insisted that the paper had never claimed that bribery had taken place and that it had intended no criticism of the Nobel committee. Scientists have now been left wondering whether *Dagens Nyheter*'s stories had more to do with a circulation war between Swedish newspapers than any genuine flaws in the Nobel selection process.

The articles, the results of months of research by journalists on *Dagens Nyheter*, were largely based on interviews with Duilio Poggiolini, former head of the Italian health ministry's pharmaceutical regulatory body, who is awaiting trial on charges of taking bribes from drug companies. Levi-Montalcini and Stanley Cohen won the 1986 Nobel Prize for their discovery of nerve growth factor in the 1950s. Poggiolini claimed that Fidia, which collapsed in 1993, had paid 15 billion lire (\$9 million) to sway the Nobel committee toward Levi-Montalcini. Fidia funded Levi-Montalcini's research at the Italian National Research Council's Institute of Neurobiology in Rome after she retired from Washington University in St. Louis in 1979—her research on nerve growth factor was of core interest to the company's work on treatments for neurodegenerative disorders.

The articles did not say that Poggiolini named any specific Swedish member of the Nobel committee, but the newspaper focused on Hökfelt, a distinguished neurobiologist at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and Nobel committee member. The *Dagens Nyheter* journalists studied Hökfelt's correspondence at the Karolinska, which was made available to them under Sweden's freedom of information laws. Hökfelt, who is one of the world's most highly cited neuroscientists and the fifth most cited biomedical researcher according to the Institute of Scientific Information, received three payments from Fidia, said the newspaper: He was awarded one of four Fidia Prizes of \$2000 in 1986; Fidia paid for him to attend a meeting in Madrid shortly

nity," says Ringertz.

Grillner later pointed out in an interview with *Science* that Fidia's support of Hökfelt is nothing out of the ordinary: Hökfelt accepted 24 invitations to speak at conferences worldwide between 1985 and 1986, he says, and the Fidia prize was just one of many awards he received. Hökfelt also notes that he had no research grants from Fidia. "I presented *Dagens Nyheter* with evidence that the \$5000 had been used to fund travel for nine key speakers to the symposium I organized, but they ignored it," says Hökfelt.

The paper initially stood its ground. It responded with an editorial on 6 September, challenging the Nobel committee to be interviewed in response to the articles. "This is a series of articles which we are behind and are proud of," one of the editors, Mats Holmberg, wrote.

*Dagens Nyheter*'s campaign was met with mounting dismay by researchers. "There was no substance whatsoever in the claims," says Lars Olson, a neurobiologist at the Karolinska Institute. Anders Björklund, a neurobiologist at the University of Lund, says: "It's an attempt to prove guilt by association. The whole scenario has little to do with reality."

Swedish researchers also rose to the defense of the process for selecting Nobel laureates, arguing that it was designed precisely to prevent undue influence by lobby groups or individuals. It involves an annual invitation to as many as 3000 scientists for nominations, which are then assessed by 15-member prize committees. The committees must then convince the Nobel Assembly of 50 scientists before the final decision is reached. On average, a prize is discussed for between 5 and 10 years before being awarded, says Bengt Pernow, chair of the Nobel committee for physiology or medicine in the early 1980s and former president of the Karolinska Institute. "We had

been discussing the field of growth factors for around 5 years before Levi-Montalcini's prize and asked five or six scientists to review the field for us as a normal part of the evaluation, but Hökfelt was not one of them," Pernow says.

As criticism of the articles mounted, the newspaper's biggest rival, *Svenska Dagbladet*, weighed in, publishing a point-by-point attack on *Dagens Nyheter*'s claims by the distinguished science historian, Tore Frängsmyr, of the University of Uppsala, who has studied the Nobel selection process for more than 25 years. "The *Dagens Nyheter* articles create a causal chain in which every link is weak. The arguments cannot be accepted. No historian would accept them, and when journalists are



**Vying for readers.** *Dagens Nyheter*'s Nobel "exposé" was attacked by an article in rival newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*.

before the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Levi-Montalcini and Cohen; and he received \$5000 from Fidia for organizing a conference.

Soon after the first article was published, Sten Grillner and Nils Ringertz, chair and secretary, respectively, of the Nobel committee for physiology or medicine, issued a statement "completely reject[ing]" the newspaper's claims. They pointed out that a researcher as prominent as Hökfelt received awards as well as support from many companies, and added that the discovery of nerve growth factor had been under consideration by the Nobel committee for many years. "The 1986 award to [Levi-Montalcini] was very well received by the scientific commu-

using historical material they must use the same criteria," Frängsmyr told *Science*.

Grillner and Ringertz also prepared a detailed rebuttal for publication in *Dagens Nyheter*. When this article was published on 15 September, it was accompanied by the newspaper's sudden about-face: two editorial statements by the editor-in-chief, Anders Mellbourn, headlined "There were no bribes," and "The laureate is not questioned." The statements said that the newspaper had not claimed that Fidia had swayed the Nobel committee and did not question Levi-Montalcini's worthiness for the award. "Some of the headlines were inappropriate," Mellbourn told *Science*. "We stand by the basic message, but some of the parts could have been better. I haven't regretted we published the articles."

Although the statements fall far short of a

complete retraction, Swedish scientists are taking it as a climbdown by the newspaper. "It's a very meek response indeed," says Ringertz. Björklund agrees: "It's a partial retraction at least," he says. "They've backed off as much as they can," says Grillner, who believes the Nobel laureate selection procedure has come through unscathed. "I don't think there is any need to change our procedure," he says.

The question researchers are asking now is why *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's most prestigious newspaper, ran the stories at all. "The wind is blowing against research and the universities at present," says Hökfelt. He points out that a major investigation by *Svenska Dagbladet* into the Medical Research Council earlier this year forced the council to replace heads of several program areas. "Both newspapers have changed their style toward more investigative journalism, which is new

in Sweden," says Björklund. Frängsmyr adds that the two papers are locked in an intense competition for a dwindling pool of readers. Annual daily newspaper sales have fallen by more than 13% since 1990 in Sweden.

Hökfelt is still considering legal action against the newspaper and is particularly concerned by the criticism of his links with the pharmaceutical industry. "There's no secrecy about my funding, and we are told by government that it's considered positive to develop commercial contacts if these assist achieving common research goals," he says. But foremost in his mind is the damage done to the reputation of Nobel committee members. When on the committee, he says, "there's nothing you care more about, and to suggest that one person can influence the process is ridiculous."

—Nigel Williams

## GOVERNMENT REORGANIZATION

### Science at Risk in Commerce Breakup

With its odd mix of trade, science, and economic-development programs, the Commerce Department is the hall closet of the federal government. And Congress seems in the mood for some tidying up. Freshman Republicans are eager to clean it out and wind up with one less Cabinet-level agency, while their elders—the chairs of committees with jurisdiction over parts of the agency—don't mind a little fall cleaning but don't want to throw away anything that belongs to them. At the same time, most Democrats insist that everything in Commerce's closet is useful and should be kept.

Last week the House Science Committee put forward a plan that would combine into a single U.S. Science and Technology Administration most of the work now being done by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST),

and the Patent and Trademark Office. Because almost two thirds of the department's \$4.2 billion budget is spent on a wide array of programs that come under the science committee's jurisdiction (see chart), the panel has a compelling interest in what happens to the department. But 10 other House committees will also have a say in the department's fate during the next few weeks. And the Senate is working on its own plan for dismantling the department (*Science*, 15 September, p. 1503).

Democrats and Republicans agree that the Commerce Department is the agency most at risk. The reason: It embraces such a diverse array of duties—from setting semiconductor standards to doling out funds for minority businesses—that it lacks a powerful constituency. "Not enough people know what Commerce does," Commerce Secretary Ron Brown lamented to the Science Committee

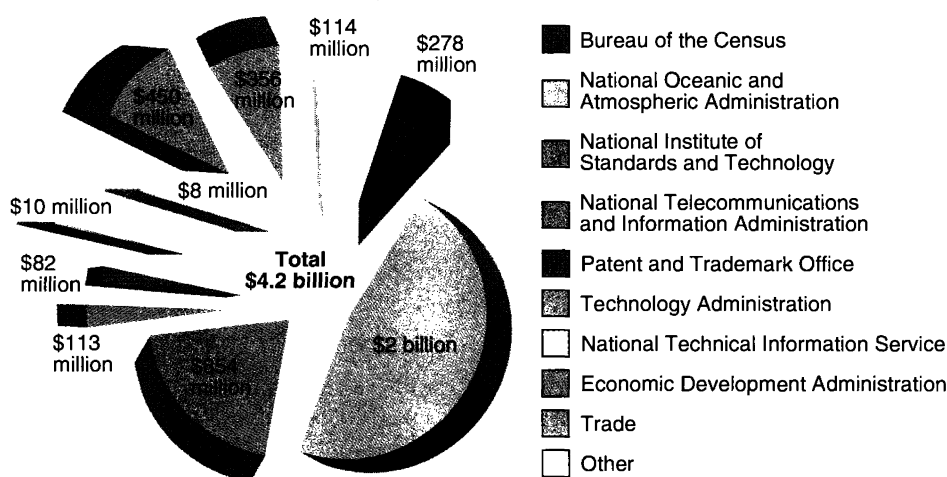
last week. But it is not clear which items in the department's closet will be kept, where they will go, or if anything will happen at all.

The starting point for the debate over Commerce's fate is a bill to dismantle the agency introduced by Representative Dick Chrysler (R-MI), part of a freshman class eager to show the public its ability to reduce bureaucracy. Chrysler's bill would dismember NOAA by eliminating some pieces and sending some to other agencies, sell off NIST labs and transfer its other functions to the National Science Foundation, and give the patents office to the Treasury Department. He testified last week before the Science Committee that many of the department's programs are superfluous and that eliminating it would save the government billions of dollars. But Brown led a chorus of witnesses who took issue with Chrysler's statements, saying that many of its activities are essential government activities and that eliminating them will weaken the U.S. economy as well as cost taxpayers money.

Brown was joined by several Republicans in expressing discomfort with many aspects of Chrysler's bill. "Few people realize how much of DOC is science-oriented," said Representative Vernon Ehlers (R-MI), a former university physics professor and a member of the panel. "I am not enamored of the Chrysler bill," added Representative Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), a veteran member of the panel. "NOAA does a magnificent job ... and nobody in their right mind would suggest eliminating it."

Many Republicans are also disturbed by Chrysler's proposal to sell off NIST laboratories. Former Commerce Secretary Barbara Franklin, who served in the Bush Administration, told the panel that this idea is both senseless and impractical, echoing concerns raised by two dozen Nobel Prize-winners last week. And Science Committee Chair Rob-

Dismantling Commerce: What's at Stake



Common ground? Science-oriented programs make up two thirds of the department's diverse portfolio.

SOURCE: COMMERCE DEPARTMENT, 1985 BUDGET