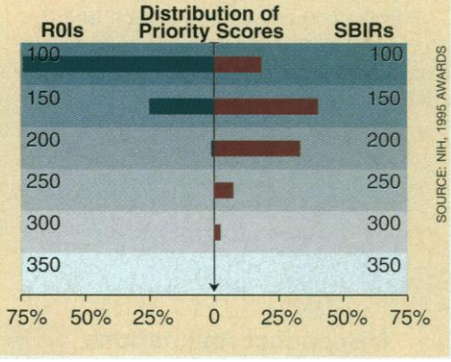
LETTERS

Policy choices

How U.S. federal grants are selected for small businesses that perform "high-quality research and development . . . work" is discussed (right, a "misguided" comparison?). The sequence of events leading to the placement, and then removal, of notices about "scientific misconduct" on databases is described. And in a continuing dialog, it is said that buying tritium from Russia for U.S. nuclear weapons could be "1/10 the cost of domestic production" of that isotope.



Small Business Grant Proposals

Several articles in *Science* have reported on the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA's) Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program (ScienceScope, 26 July, p. 419; E. Marshall, News & Comment, 21 June, p. 1733; J. Mervis, News & Comment, 17 May, p. 942). As the 26 July ScienceScope piece points out, it was announced on 19 July (by Carl B. Feldbaum, president of the Biotechnology Industry Organization) that U.S. Representative John Porter (R–IL) had joined with Representative Joseph P. Kennedy II (D–MA) in a commitment to maintain the full fiscal year 1997 2.5% set-aside for SBIR grants at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Feldbaum has high praise for the agreement. This action followed allegations by a small number of academicians that the SBIR program was somehow producing subpar results. These allegations were based on the premise that, at NIH, the rankings for SBIR proposals were lower than those for regular research grant (R01) projects.

It is important to be aware that there are differences between NIH's peer-reviewing processes for each program. In the guidelines for the R01 reviewing process (*1*), reviewers are asked to identify those applications that would not benefit from further discussion (about 40%). Most of these applications are not scored. The guidelines for the reviewers then state that the scores for the upper half shall be distributed across the range from 100 to 250. The lower the score, the better the project.

For the SBIR projects, the reviewers are asked (*2*) to identify those applications that should not be recommended for further consideration (about 46%). The NIH guidelines then state that it is important that the reviewers use the full range (100 to 500) of scoring for their final evaluations. Given these differing methodologies, R01 scores are more likely to fall below 300, while some of the SBIR scores will be above 300. Clearly, these are two different programs, with two different sets of directives and two different scoring systems. Therefore, any qualitative ranking based on the NIH scoring system would be misguided. In a letter to SBA's Chief Counsel for Advocacy, Jere W. Glover, NIH Director Harold Varmus stated, "Because of these scoring differences, the NIH resists making any side-by-side comparisons of the quality of a proposal based on the priority scores alone."

As the independent U.S. General Accounting Office has reported numerous times, high-quality research and development (R&D) work is being performed by small businesses that is benefiting our national defense needs, improving our highways and airports, and contributing to our health and safety. Through the SBIR program, the SBA is committed to ensuring that quality R&D work performed by small businesses will continue to be a part of these important efforts.

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References

1. "Streamlined review procedures used in DRG" (Division of Research Grants, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, 1996).
2. "Review group members' orientation, Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program" (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, November 1995).