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EDITORIAL

New Politics in Science

In October 1996, six scientists—John Robbins and Rachel Schneerson from the National Institutes of Health (NIH); Porter Anderson from North Miami Beach, Florida; David H. Smith from the David Hamilton Smith Foundation in New York; Robert Furchgott from the Health Science Center of the State University of New York at Brooklyn; and Ferid Murad from Lake Forest, Illinois—received the Albert Lasker Medical Research Awards for their exceptional contributions to basic and clinical research and public service. The work of these scientists will have an impact well into the new millennium, but that impact will be affected by what we do now that another selection process—the election of our new President and new members of Congress—also is over.

These are complicated times for the U.S. scientific enterprise. To say that the process of funding NIH and other agencies that support biomedical research has been a careening roller coaster ride is not an exaggeration. Fortunately, Senator Mark Hatfield and Congressman John Porter provided some balance through their leadership; as a result, the 1997 budget for NIH increased. However, substantial reductions in overall government spending for science and technology have been projected to be about 25 percent by the year 2002. Entire sectors have been targeted for elimination. On another level, and perhaps a more insidious one, there seems to be an effort to restrict the intellectual independence of scientific research in this country. Ten senators of the 104th Congress protested the Centers for Disease Control's support for university-based studies of injuries caused by firearms, which account for 37,000 deaths in this country each year. The senators' rationale was that the studies are hostile to legitimate gun ownership. In addition, the projected sweeping reorganization of health care delivery threatens funding for science as well as the infrastructure of biomedical research in our nation's academic health centers.

At times like these, a strengthened national commitment to medical research is essential. Doubling our national investment in research would not only enhance and save lives; it would also save money. The Alliance for Aging Research reports that if the onset of Alzheimer's could be delayed by 5 years, the nation would save $50 billion annually. A similar delay in the onset of cardiovascular diseases could save $69 billion per year. Science is poised to make delayed onset and, ultimately, cure and prevention of these and other diseases a reality, although recent scientific breakthroughs have raised ideological and ethical issues that will need to be addressed. For example, what are the rights of the fetus? In an aging population, what are the costs and benefits of keeping people alive by artificial means? How these and other issues are resolved will surely affect the public's attitude toward research, and that attitude ultimately determines how the decision-makers in Washington will construct future federal research and development budgets and provide incentives for the conduct of research in the private sector.

Relations between the public and the scientific community must be strengthened so that support from the average citizen continues. Too many members of the research community remain quite removed from advocacy; the new politics in Washington demand new politics in science. We need to stay allied as a scientific community and use our alliance to stimulate understanding and advocacy among members of the public and, in turn, decision-makers. Polls conducted by Research!America and other organizations consistently show that Americans believe that medical research should be a higher national priority. Not only is the public supportive, it wants to be better informed about research. Researchers and health care providers can empower our citizenry to act. These highly respected individuals must take the time to interact in the community, explain research, speak at civic meetings, appear on television, write opinion pieces for the local newspapers, and meet with editorial boards. Every scientist working today and every other stakeholder in research can, and must, carry the message as we move into the next century.

Paul G. Rogers

The author was a U.S. congressman from Florida for 24 years and was known as "Mr. Health" for sponsoring or playing a significant role in enacting major health legislation. He is currently chair of the board of Research!America in Alexandria, Virginia. This editorial is based on his remarks at the recent Lasker Awards luncheon.