

Panel Urges Cloning Ethics Boards

A 7-month review of the system that guides U.S. policy on the ethical, legal, and social issues (ELSI) of the Human Genome Project has concluded that it is time for a radical overhaul. A report completed last month recommends that a high-level policy board be created in the office of the Secretary of Health and Human Services to help develop policies on such sensitive issues as genetic privacy, antidiscrimination legislation, public education on genetic risks, and the regulation of genetic testing.

If accepted, the proposal—from a review panel chaired by attorney Mark Rothstein of the University of Houston and geneticist M. Anne Spence of the University of California, Irvine—would create a new panel of 15 to 18 members to serve as “a public forum for discussion of ... critical issues.” This panel would replace the current advisory body, known as the ELSI Working Group, and end what the report calls a “discordance” between the broad scope of the Working Group and the “very limited focus” of the research program under which it operates.

The review panel also calls for the creation of two specialized committees to evaluate research on ethical, legal, and social is-

ssues in genetics. One would focus on extramural grants and the other on intramural activities; both would be attached to the genome research agencies—the National Institutes of Health’s (NIH’s) National Center for Human Genome Research (NCHGR) and the Department of Energy.

The reviewers were “absolutely and totally unanimous to the dot” in recommending these changes, says Spence. Her panel began work last May at the request of Francis Collins, NCHGR’s director, after friction developed within NCHGR’s own ELSI program. For the past 6 years, the ELSI Working Group has conducted its own studies and helped guide the ELSI program—which gets 5% of NCHGR’s budget (*Science*, 25 October 1996, p. 488). Some members of the Working Group wanted NCHGR to expand the group’s policy research budget so they could delve into issues of broad social concern, including the study of genetics and behavior. Collins rejected this agenda in early 1996, saying his administrative budget was too tight. Two members of the Working Group resigned. That spat may have prompted the review: Collins asked for it, he said recently, because “there was some uncertainty on the Working Group itself ...

about what exactly its mission is.”

Spence says the review concluded that the Working Group was hindered by its lowly status and confused mandate. A subcommittee of the Working Group, for example, spends much of its time talking to independent agencies, trying to devise rules on genetic testing. “It was awkward, having a subcommittee of a subcommittee talking to the Food and Drug Administration,” says Spence. Rothstein adds that the Working Group “seemed misplaced,” being “so far down in the pecking order.”

Two other major government panels are already chewing over social and ethical issues in genetics: the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee, which advises the director of NIH, and a White House panel called the National Biomedical Advisory Council, chaired by Princeton University President Harold Shapiro. But Rothstein says there’s so much work to do in developing federal policies on genetics that a departmental board should complement these panels without duplicating their work.

Such a move would shift some responsibility from Collins’s jurisdiction. Collins had no comment on the possible fate of the Working Group, but his office issued a statement saying he and others will discuss it at an open meeting of the NCHGR advisory council on 20 February.

—Eliot Marshall

RUSSIA

Duma Holds Down Science Budget

MOSCOW—Despite heavy lobbying by government officials, Russian legislators last month fell short of meeting a promise from Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to spend 3% of the country’s budget on science. After two rounds of debate on the 1997 budget, lawmakers gave preliminary approval to a figure of \$2.725 billion, about 2.9% of the country’s overall budget. And that’s the good news. “As recently as 10 days ago, the situation was substantially worse,” says Vladimir Fortov, deputy prime minister and chair of the state committee of science and technologies. An enormous effort was needed, he says, “to take science out of the critical zone.”

While the 1997 figure is about 12% higher than 1996’s budget, it would still leave many programs in dire straits. And in recent years, the government has been unable to deliver even what has been allocated.

If there is a winner in this bleak picture, it’s the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). Its share of the science budget would rise to 15% in 1997 from its current 12%, in line with a promise President Boris Yeltsin made to the academy during last year’s election campaign. In contrast, the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, which funds peer-

reviewed grants, is facing a reduction in its share from 4% to 3.8%.

Ironically, Fortov is also head of the foundation, which last summer won a promise from the government to raise its share of the overall science budget to 6%. But Fortov is a relative newcomer to the government—he was appointed last August (*Science*, 30 August 1996, p. 1167)—and he must compete against such powerful lobbies as big business, defense, and agriculture.

The Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, discussed the 1997 budget twice in one week last month. During the first day’s debate, it set science spending at \$2.5 billion—the level initially requested by the government. The figure represents 2.67% of an overall budget of \$95 billion.

That decision triggered a threat from the RAS employees’ trade union, burned by several late paychecks, to resume street protests if the science budget was not increased. Three days later, after Chernomyrdin said that \$2.5 billion was not enough, Fortov announced that the government had “found” another 1.5 trillion rubles (about \$271 million), “and we hope to find some more.” Later that same day, however, the Duma

budget committee reduced the windfall by 250 billion rubles. “Even though the new figure may be only one-tenth of a percent [shy of 3%], it’s a significant amount,” says Mikhail Glubokovsky, deputy chair of the Duma science committee.

All this discussion may, in the end, be academic, however. Budget levels in Russia are not the same thing as money spent: Government officials recently announced with pride that they have paid 80% of the academy’s 1996 allocation for salaries and expenses after failing to meet scheduled payments over the summer. Institutes outside the academy have received even less, with some of the state research centers operating on as little as 35% of their expected levels.

Fortov says improved tax collection from existing businesses and revenues from increased economic activity should ease the funding crunch next year, but Glubokovsky predicts that 1997 payments will remain at last year’s levels. Given an expected inflation rate of 20%, he adds, the status quo represents a step backward for science.

—Andrey Allakhverdiv and
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