

bution and its high operating cost than on the quality of its research. Says panel vice chair and Stanford University physicist Zhixun Shen: "The question was what is the most cost-effective way to make the biggest scientific impact." The facility's \$33 million operating budget is 50% larger than that of SSRL, but it has fewer than half the users. The report also notes that "important scientific issues which require UV radiation have decreased in number [since 1984] compared to those which require hard x-rays." ALS's Kincaid acknowledges that "there's no standing body of applications that can be easily capitalized on" for using the ALS's soft x-ray and UV photons. "But that's why the ALS was built, to get into this area," he says.

Asked whether ALS should be re-engi-

neered to provide the harder x-rays that are in higher demand, Birgeneau says he believes that would be a mistake. "There is important science to do in the UV and soft x-ray range," he says. But in divvying up the money, "the panel was presented with more compelling scientific cases by facilities in the hard x-ray range."

Observers say that the Birgeneau report is a gutsy attempt to set priorities, and that the effort is worth it even if it makes enemies. "I do think that priorities have to be set," says Wim Hol, who heads the biomolecular structure center at the University of Washington, Seattle. Andrew Sessler, president-elect of the American Physical Society, agrees: "It's much better to have scientists involved in setting these priorities than politicians. But

you can question whether the choices are wise. I never expected that the priorities would put ALS at the bottom."

Rather than sounding a death knell for ALS, say Kincaid and others, the report gives DOE ammunition to lobby the Administration and Congress for greater support for all synchrotrons. "I think it provides a very good basis on which to argue to OMB [the Office of Management and Budget] that this is a budget that we need to think about [increasing]," agrees Martha Krebs, director of DOE's Office of Energy Research. But in the absence of extra money, the panel has provided a rare example of scientists setting some painful priorities.

—Robert F. Service

## ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

### Senate Hears Testimony Supporting OAM

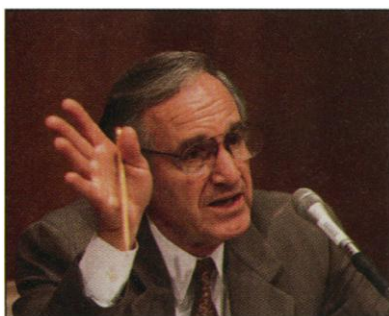
This fall once seemed to be shaping up as a make-or-break period for the Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM), the National Institutes of Health's (NIH's) controversial outfit for testing unconventional therapies. OAM's critics, who include several prominent scientists, have mounted a letter-writing campaign accusing the office of lending credibility to quackery and calling on Congress to eliminate it (*Science*, 11 July, p. 169). Its supporters, led by Iowa's senior senator, Tom Harkin (D), are pushing vigorously in the opposite direction: OAM, they say, should get a 10-fold budget increase and be elevated to the status of a full-fledged NIH center. Neither camp is likely to get its wish, however.

Senate staffers say NIH's 1998 budget, currently hung up in a House-Senate conference committee, will probably include a sum for OAM somewhere between the \$7.4 million the House allotted and the \$13 million Senate appropriation. This year, the office received just under \$12 million. And the notion of elevating OAM's status doesn't appear to be catching fire politically—at least to judge from a hearing on the topic held last week by a key Senate subcommittee.

Former heart surgeon William Frist (R-TN), chair of the Labor and Human Resources subcommittee on Public Health and Safety, called the hearing to explore issues likely to come up in the NIH reauthorization bill, which will be drafted this fall. Committee member Harkin, a major force behind the creation of the OAM in 1992, was there to argue for his proposal to remove OAM from

the Office of the NIH Director, where it currently resides, and turn it into an independent center with the power to form its own peer-review panels and distribute grants.

Two scientists testified in favor of Harkin's proposal. Internist and assistant professor of medicine David Eisenberg of Harvard Medical School in Boston, who is a member of OAM's scientific advisory board, noted that an estimated 61 million Americans use alternative therapies ranging from herbal



**Bee pollen devotee.** Senator Harkin has proposed independent, expanded OAM.

treatments to hypnosis, spending as much as \$14 billion each year. James Gordon, a professor of psychiatry and family medicine at Georgetown University School of Medicine, added that as many as 70% of cancer patients seek some form of alternative therapy. Those figures, said Harkin—who credits bee pollen with curing

his allergies—are reason enough to focus more research in an area "where the public has been voting with their pocketbooks all along."

If an independent center were given \$125 million to \$200 million a year, Eisenberg said, "some of the best scientific investigators would step forward" to research alternative therapies. The public needs good science to sort the worthless and dangerous from the potentially helpful, he told the subcommittee, and "we have to get it the old-fashioned way: Buy it."

But a third member of the panel, immunologist Robert Rich of Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, representing the Association of American Medical Colleges, said creation of a separate center would double ad-

ministrative costs and might actually hinder research. He argued that the current arrangement, in which the office can support grants through existing institutes, takes advantage of those institutes' expertise in particular diseases. For example, he noted that OAM director Wayne Jonas (who was not at the hearing) has praised a cooperative new study by OAM, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the Office of Dietary Supplements on the use of St. John's wort for clinical depression (see p. 391). A separate center, he said, would emphasize the gap between so-called alternative and conventional therapies. "That dichotomy is wrong," he said. "The dichotomy is between good science and bad science."

Because Frist hadn't offered any opinions on OAM, its supporters and critics were eager to gauge his reaction to Harkin's proposal. Although attentive, Frist seemed unpersuaded. He noted that because alternative medicine encompasses such a broad range of treatments, he "sensed a fear" that peer review at an independent center "would not demand the same rigorous science as is demanded historically by the institutes that are in existence."

Robert Park of the American Physical Society, a longtime critic of OAM, said he was pleased with the hearing. He and six other scientists, including Nobel laureates Paul Berg, a Stanford University biochemist, and Jerome Friedman, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology physicist, wrote a letter to Frist last week expressing support for efforts to investigate alternative therapies "provided that the research is held to rigorous scientific standards, is suitably peer-reviewed, and is fairly administered." But, the letter adds, "to elevate OAM to the status of a National Center without first examining its strengths and weaknesses would risk amplifying existing problems." Park predicts that Frist will listen. "My reading," he says, "is that for the time being, the center concept is dead."

—Gretchen Vogel