A New Link Between Tobacco and Cancer

One of the biggest winners in the 1999 budget proposals is cancer research—and the Administration is going out of its way to emphasize that fact. On 29 January, 4 days before the budget was officially released, Vice President Al Gore announced in a packed auditorium at the Executive Office Building in Washington, D.C., that the Administration is proposing "the single largest increase in cancer research in history"—a $4.7 billion boost over the next 5 years.

This 65% raise for cancer is part of a planned 50% increase through 2003 for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), funded by a proposed settlement of lawsuits against tobacco companies. The first installment will be a 1999 boost of $1.15 billion (an 8.4% raise above NIH's 1998 budget of $13.6 billion). In addition, the Administration intends to set aside $750 million for a 3-year experiment that would reimburse Medicare cancer patients for the cost of participating in NIH-funded clinical trials. The focus on cancer is justified, Gore said, because "many experts believe that we are at the cusp of important new breakthroughs ... that merit or justify a much greater investment in research." Donna Shalala, secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), added that the Administration's goal is to let researchers know that "the science money is going to be there in the future, and you're going to be able to sustain a career." Shalala said she has been trying to reduce the uncertainty of research funding: "That is the real significance" of this budget, she said, "not just the diseases we are going to attack."

The biomedical community was delighted. NIH director Harold Varmus said as the numbers were unveiled this week: "All the NIH [institute] directors are extremely happy." Shalala described them as "ecstatic." Speaking for the Coalition for Health Funding—a loose association of organizations that claims to represent 40 million health workers—Jordan Cohen, president of the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC), called the Administration's budget "very gratifying." Yet AAMC and the coalition aren't completely satisfied: They will urge Congress to appropriate even more for NIH in 1999—a 15% increase.
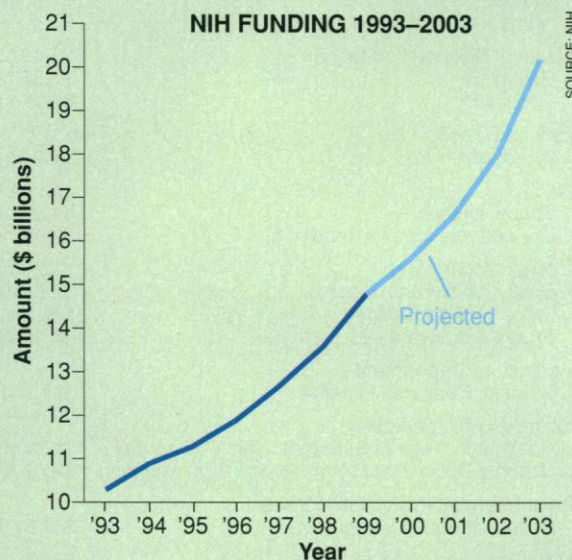
But Jordan and AAMC congressional liaison David Moore also acknowledge something that Administration officials do not emphasize—that all this good news is built on a shaky hypothesis. This is the assumption that Congress will pass legislation this year that once and for all settles the states' litigation against the tobacco companies, and that the settlement will bring the federal government an extra $65 billion in revenue over the next 5 years. The entire increase in the NIH budget—not to mention other elements of the science budget—is premised on the belief that Congress will make this happen. But, as Moore says, infighting over the terms of the tobacco settlement is intense, and there's no consensus in sight.

Asked what would happen if the tobacco settlement isn't approved, Shalala said: "We expect Congress to pass legislation, but if this doesn't come to pass ... we will have to identify other sources" of revenue or make cuts in other programs to pay for R&D funding increases. Shalala's assistant secretary for management, John Callahan, added, "We are committed to these priorities," and "we will deal with [a loss of tobacco income] when we come to that point in the road."

A congressional aide who works on the NIH budget worries that the Administration has "opened a can of worms" by focusing so heavily on cancer, however. The Administration may have shifted attention away from old arguments that AIDS funding is taking a disproportionate share of NIH's budget, he said, but it may be inviting a renewed debate on earmarking as lobbyists for research on other diseases eye cancer's bulging resources.

Varmus told reporters at a budget briefing that the cancer initiative should be viewed not as an earmark but as a broad commitment to build up NIH's infrastructure. He said the $4.7 billion in extra cancer money would help pay for new training programs, clinical trials databases, larger stipends, instrumentation development, and new genetics projects—all to be spelled out later. "Everyone is a winner in this budget," Varmus insists.

—**Eliot Marshall**

NIH FUNDING 1993–2003

SOURCE: NIH

Career numbers. An expanding NIH budget will help biomedical researchers "to sustain a career," says HHS's Shalala.

(10%), infrastructure development at the National Center for Research Resources (14%), diabetes research (11%), and AIDS vaccine research (17%), among other categories.

• **NASA:** The space agency is a relative loser in the R&D spending plan, but NASA Administrator Dan Goldin has put on a brave face. He insists that the agency is lean enough to take a $173 million decline, to $13.5 billion, without hurting its programs. And it's better than the $1 billion cut the White House was contemplating a few months ago. "For what we have on our plate today, we have adequate resources," he says. Goldin notes that space science will increase 4%, to $2 billion, providing money to begin planning a mission to Jupiter's moon Europa and a sample-return mission to Mars. Life and microgravity sciences also would get a boost— a $28 million increase to $242 million.

But the pressures to keep the space station effort on schedule will be intense. Goldin says NASA wants to take $50 million from space science and $50 million from earth science in 1998 to help cover station cost overruns, although he pledges that "we will still do everything" planned for those disciplines. Congress, however, must approve any such funding transfers. For 1999, NASA officials say the overruns could get worse, although the administrator says he's optimistic that the program is under control.

• **Energy:** The bulk of the proposed Department of Energy budget—which would increase $1.4 billion to $18 billion—goes to R&D-related programs. Of that increase, $338 million is set aside for renewable and fossil energy R&D, while the nuclear weapons stockpile stewardship effort jumps $330 mil-