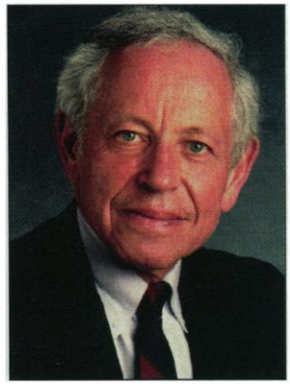
BIOMEDICAL POLICY

NIH Urged to Involve the Public in Policy-Making

With more than 100 standing committees already providing tons of advice, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) wouldn't seem to need more advisers. But that's what the doctor has ordered. To cure a "major weakness" in communication between NIH's leaders and the public, a group of experts at the Institute of Medicine (IOM) chaired by molecular biologist Leon Rosenberg of Princeton University has recommended that NIH create a new network of committees that would enable public representatives to communicate more directly with NIH's brass about research policy.



High marks. Rosenberg says NIH's priority setting is sound.

The 18 to 25 people named to each new panel, the 8 July IOM report* says, should represent "a broad range of public constituencies," including "disease specific interest groups, ethnic groups, public health advocates, and health care providers." Chosen by NIH for 3-year terms, these tribunes would sit on a Council of Public Representatives in the NIH director's office and on similar councils in the offices of the directors of each of NIH's 21 institutes and centers. They would be supported by a new permanent staff of "public liaison" agents, who would also solicit information and help citizens understand NIH. Acknowledging one possible undesirable outcome of this scheme, the IOM report warns that the council "is not intended to serve as a forum for advocacy groups to lobby the NIH director for research dollars" for their special interest. Instead, it says, members would set aside the targeted politics that got them to the table and offer "valuable and thoughtful perspectives on [NIH's] research programs."

These are the most weighty recommendations in a list of a dozen issued last week by IOM, part of a report commissioned by Congress at the request of Republican Senators William Frist (TN) and Dan Coats (IN). Congress asked IOM to carry out this 6-month review of how NIH goes about ranking its funding priorities to help clarify its own decision-making. The assignment, as the IOM report notes, grew out of a contentious debate in recent years over whether AIDS research ought to get the large set-aside it has been receiving—currently about $1.6 billion of the total $13.6 billion NIH budget. The debate heated up when breast cancer activists copied the AIDS lobby and also began to win big funding set-asides from Congress. Next, the traditional groups for research on heart disease and diabetes appealed for attention, arguing that NIH spends less per patient on their diseases than on AIDS. Advocates for Parkinson's and Alzheimer's patients pushed for a bigger share. Congress held some hearings (*Science*, 18 April 1997, p. 344) and in 1997 tossed the problem to IOM.

After holding a couple of public meetings at which NIH officials and disease advocacy groups gave their views, the IOM panel apparently decided—like Congress—to finesse the debate on how best to rank biomedical research needs. Rosenberg says that the panel studied NIH's priority-setting methods, based chiefly on scientific opportunity, and found them "sound." However, the panel felt that NIH does not clearly explain how it uses these criteria. In particular, the Rosenberg panel concluded, NIH is lax in the way it collects and provides data on "disease burden"—indicating the relative impact of different illnesses—and on the amount of money it spends in various disease categories. NIH leaders may not like using such data, Rosenberg says, but "those numbers are used in Congress ... so they should be better." The report makes several recommendations for strengthening the data.

The "hardest part" of preparing the report, Rosenberg says, was figuring out how relations between the public and NIH leaders could be improved. The NIH director's office "currently does not have any mechanism for regular exchange with the public at large," says Rosenberg, adding "we heard quite a lot about that in our public meeting." Asked whether the proposed new advisory councils might not become outposts for lobby groups, Rosenberg said he takes an optimistic view: "If you offer people a special responsibility, they generally rise to the occasion. ... I believe they would educate each other and elevate the entire debate about priority setting and earmarking."

NIH director Harold Varmus, who was being briefed by IOM panel members at press time, could not be reached for comment.

—ELIOT MARSHALL

*Scientific Opportunities and Public Needs, Institute of Medicine, 8 July.

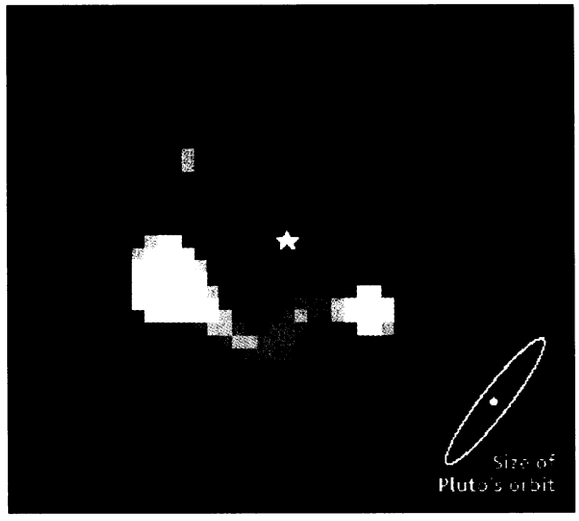
ASTRONOMY

Hints of a Nearby Solar System?

A ring of dust, probably kicked up by a swarm of comets, has been spotted around Epsilon Eridani, the nearest sunlike star, just 10 light-years away. "What we see looks just like the [dusty] comet belt on the outskirts of our own solar system," says Jane Greaves of the Joint Astronomy Center in Hawaii. The appearance of the dust ring also suggests that planets are orbiting nearby, says Greaves, who announced the discovery this week at the Protostars and Planets Conference in Santa Barbara, California.

Greaves and her colleagues imaged the ring with the Submillimeter Common User Bolometer Array (SCUBA), a sensitive camera built by the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh and mounted on the 15-meter British-Dutch-Canadian James Clerk Maxwell Telescope at Mauna Kea, Hawaii. They had already used SCUBA, which is sensitive to the short radio wavelengths at which dust radiates strongly, to detect similar disks around the hotter and brighter stars Vega, Fomalhaut, and Beta Pictoris, and other astronomers have detected disks as well (*Science*, 24 April, p. 523 and this issue, p. 182). But Epsilon Eridani is cooler and more sunlike than the other stars with disks, although it is just a tenth of the sun's age.

Because the star is so close, the dust ring—which can be seen face-on—shows unprecedented detail. The dusty doughnut is about the size of our solar system's Kuiper belt, a flattened disk of comets outside Neptune's orbit. But the strength of the submillimeter waves implies that the dust is far denser than it is in the Kuiper



GREAVES ET AL.

Jewel in the crown? The bright knot at the 8 o'clock position in Epsilon Eridani's dust disk might signal a planet.