RESEARCH ETHICS

Sweden Considers More Oversight of Research

STOCKHOLM—Swedish scientists may soon see radical changes in the way research proposals are evaluated. Last month, a committee of parliamentarians issued a sheaf of recommendations designed to increase public oversight of research. Their proposals would subject all academic research involving human subjects or tissue to ethical review, turn the peer review of grants on its head by giving applicants anonymity while revealing the identity of reviewers, and require all graduate students to attend courses in research ethics.

The committee was set up 20 months ago in response to several well-publicized cases of research fraud, studies indicating sex bias and nepotism in the awarding of grants in Sweden, and controversy over research such as the cloning of Dolly and experiments on human embryos. The suggested reforms aim to shore up public confidence in science by creating more of a dialogue between researchers and the public. "If we don't handle it right, the general public will lose trust in science," says committee chair Barbro Westerholm, a liberal party parliamentarian. The report is now being sent to research organizations across Sweden for comments, after which the government will decide whether to act on its recommendations.

The most significant proposal would require each university to establish an independent ethics committee—made up of equal numbers of laypeople and scientists—to review research involving humans or human tissue. Psychology and sociology studies, and any work that uses identifiable data from medical or scientific records, would be included. Currently, academic ethics committees review medical research conducted with public grants, but they are not required to look at privately funded studies.

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Most researchers have welcomed this proposal in principle, but there has been skirmishing over the details. For example, the report suggests that the committees' decisions should be made by consensus, but medical ethicist Birgitta Forsman of Göteborg University argues that "majority decisions are much better for controversial issues." The risk, she says, is that "people would vote to accomplish consensus in order not to appear too difficult instead of expressing their true opinion."

The report suggests that if researchers are not satisfied with a committee's decision, they could seek a second opinion from another independent ethics committee. But a minority of the parliamentarians argued that the ethics committees should be given clearer ground rules and that their decisions should be legally binding. "We already have a number of committees devoted to questions of ethics in human medical research. But what we still haven't seen is the legal regulation as to what principles the committees should work from," says lawyer Elisabeth Rynning of Uppsala University.

To counter scientific misconduct, the report urges the government to set up a central commission to deal with individual cases. It also says researchers should be required to document and file important scientific material for at least 10 years, and they should be obliged to reveal any industrial or financial interests in their research. And—stressing that prevention is better than cure—it suggests that all graduate students be required to take courses in research ethics.

Stellan Welin at the Center for Research Ethics in Göteborg argues that even these measures lack teeth. "It would be better if reporting of scientific misconduct was made obligatory by law," he says. But Forsman counters that obligatory whistle-blowing would create a legal minefield: "Because there is no exact definition of what scientific misconduct consists of, it is extremely difficult to create formal legislation."

As for peer review, the committee took note of recent studies indicating that the allocation of grants in Sweden is biased against women, young researchers, and workers in cross-disciplinary fields. One remedy, the committee says, is to appoint more women to evaluating committees. "Both women and men should be educated in techniques for gender-neutral evaluation," says immunologist Agnes Wold of Göteborg University. But it also has a more radical suggestion: Grant applicants should remain anonymous in the first stage of the review, while the reviewers should be named. And the results of peer review should be made publicly available so that applicants can debate the decisions with reviewers.

This idea is likely to be controversial. "In general, my experience is that the applicant and what they have already accomplished is a better indication that interesting science will result," says astrophysicist Bengt Gustafsson of Uppsala University. "Moreover, opening the reviews to public scrutiny will make them more conventional and polite, which is of no benefit to science."

Concerns like these are likely to get a thorough public airing over the next few months.

–JOANNA ROSE AND ANNIKA NILSSON

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AIDS VACCINES

Nabel to Head NIH Vaccine Research Center

After searching for more than a year, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has finally found a scientist to head its nascent Vaccine Research Center (VRC): Gary Nabel, a gene therapy expert at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Donna Shalala, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, announced on 11 March that Nabel has agreed to run the vaguely defined VRC, which will focus initially on searching for an AIDS vaccine.

New territory. Nabel's initial focus will be new AIDS vaccines.

President Clinton announced that NIH would build the new center—which will have a budget of $16.5 million this year—in a landmark speech on 18 May 1997, in which he challenged scientists to develop an AIDS vaccine by 2007. The leading AIDS vaccine advocacy groups have criticized NIH for taking so long to find a suitable scientist to head the venture. But Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, says difficult jobs take longer to fill. Fauci, who had a say in the final selection, did acknowledge, however, that NIH had offered the job to a few other scientists who turned it down.

NIH originally wanted a candidate who had worked in industry, which Nabel has not. "If we could get an excellent person—scientifically a heavyweight—who had industrial experience, we would have gravitated toward it," allows Fauci. Failing that, he says, "we'd rather have a heavyweight than someone from industry." Nabel emerged as the leading candidate earlier this year (*Science*, 1 January, p. 17), but a deal took several months to close. It was finalized when his wife, Elizabeth, a prominent cardiologist, secured a top job at the National

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