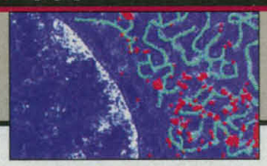
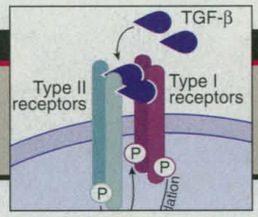




cleavage occurs. Either way, the presenilins could be potential targets for Alzheimer's drugs, says Selkoe.

Even without knowing the actual identities of any of these enzymes, drug companies have been developing compounds that block their activity. Bristol-Myers Squibb plans to start clinical trials next year on a drug that interferes with γ-secretase activity, though it's not clear if this drug blocks the enzyme itself. Molecular biologist Barbara Cordell says her biotech company, Scios Inc. in Sunnyvale, California, has "both β- and γ- secretase inhibitors and compounds that inhibit [amyloid] by a mechanism we don't understand." Scios has formed partnerships with two large pharmaceutical companies that hope to test some of these drugs in people.

In addition, now that researchers have actual secretase enzymes in hand, they can look for more specific and powerful inhibitors. BACE, for example, is similar to the HIV protease in the AIDS virus, and many compounds have been already developed to inhibit that enzyme.

Alzheimer's researchers hope such compounds will not just prevent new plaques from forming but will also help the brain rid itself of those already present. But whether that can be done without unacceptable side effects remains to be seen. And there's still the big question of whether these drugs will actually make a difference for patients.

Even so, such inhibitors could "provide an excellent opportunity to [affect] Alzheimer's disease in a profound and important way," says Steven Younkin, a neuroscientist at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Florida. "If we don't isolate the secretases and develop inhibitors, it's totally irresponsible."

–ELIZABETH PENNISI

SCIENCE POLICY

Science Supporter John Porter to Leave Congress

One of the strongest congressional supporters of biomedical research, Representative John Porter (R–IL), announced last week that he will not run for reelection next year. He is the third strong voice for biomedicine who will soon leave a high-profile position.

Porter, chair of the House appropriations subcommittee that drafts the annual funding bill for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), made the surprise announcement on 12 October. After 21 years on Capitol Hill, Porter told reporters, he wants to pursue "other opportunities and challenges." He's one of a handful of Capitol Hill leaders who have worked to put the NIH budget on a path toward doubling between 1999 and 2003. Porter played a pivotal role in 1995, for example, when a draconian plan drawn up by the new Republican-led budget committee proposed a 5% cut in NIH funding for each

Retiring. Representative John Porter.

of the next 5 years. Porter ushered a delegation of researchers and biotech executives into the office of then–Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R–GA) to make a plea for sparing biomedical research. Afterward, NIH got a 5.7% increase, and Gingrich became a research champion, too.

Since then, Porter has spoken out several times about his frustrations in dealing with an increasingly fractious federal budget process. Porter's press officer, David Kohn, says his own view is that the "tenor and atmosphere" of congressional debate has become more acrimonious and that his boss seemed to grow tired of the "continual battles with the right wing of his party" over gun control, abortion, and the environment. Kohn adds, however, that new rules adopted by the Republican leadership in 1995 require Porter to step down as chair of the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Subcommittee in any case after 2000, and "it was the right moment for a change." There's no "hidden motivation," Kohn says: Porter really does want to spend more time with his children and grandchildren.

Porter's decision to step out of national politics comes on the heels of similar actions by two other key players in biomedical politics. NIH director Harold Varmus revealed last week that he will resign in December to become president of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City (*Science*, 15 October 1999, p. 382). And Senator Connie Mack (R–FL)—another advocate of doubling NIH's budget by 2003 and a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee—announced in March that he will not run for reelection in 2000.

It might not be worrisome if just one of these figures were leaving, says Michael Stephens, lobbyist for the Federation of American Societies of Experimental Biology. But to have all three depart at the same time, he says, "could create a real problem" by depleting the ranks of officials who care about biomedical research.

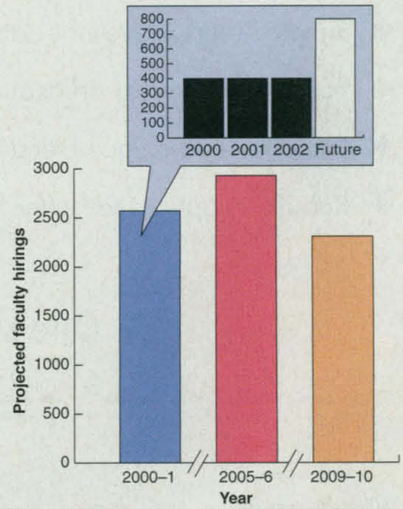
–ELIOT MARSHALL

CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

Massive Hiring Plan Aimed at 'Brain Gain'

OTTAWA—Canadian universities will soon be turned loose on a massive shopping spree for scientific talent. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien last week unveiled a US$205 million program to create 2000 new research chairs, calling it a "plan for brain gain" aimed at reversing a flow of talent to the United States. University officials applaud the initiative, even if it derives more from a desire to outflank political foes than to strengthen academic research.

The issue of "brain drain" is a political hot potato in Canada. Business leaders have



Sitting pretty. Canada's plan to fund 2000 research chairs (inset) will help universities cope with projected vacancies from retirement and rising enrollment.

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