INTERVIEW

Setting Priorities Puts New Minister in the Hot Seat

A longtime advocate, Koji Omi helped write Japan's first basic plan for science. Now he has to defend controversial new spending priorities

WASHINGTON, D.C.—When Japan's ministries unveiled their budget requests on 31 August, the numbers revealed a surprising shift in support for science and technology (*Science*, 7 September, p. 1743). Huge jumps in four fields, led by the life and materials sciences, accompany cuts in space and marine science severe enough to cause delays in building major facilities. This prioritization, new for Japan, has opened cracks in its previously unified scientific community.

The man behind that new alignment is Koji Omi, 68, since April the minister for science and technology policy. As head of the Council for Science and Technology Policy, chaired by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Omi serves as Koizumi's de facto science adviser. A member of the Diet (legislature) since 1983, Omi led the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's science policy subcommittee, which in 1996 pushed through a law that led to the country's first-ever Science and Technology Basic Plan. A second plan, which took effect this year, proposes an increase in government spending on science to 1% of gross domestic product, up from the current 0.7%.

A commerce graduate of Hitotsubashi University and a former Ministry of International Trade and Industry bureaucrat, Omi admits that his lack of scientific background sometimes puts him at a disadvantage. "I do not clearly understand the substance of scientific discussions," he says. "However, with my passion and enthusiasm, I believe that I contribute to creating a very favorable environment for researchers."

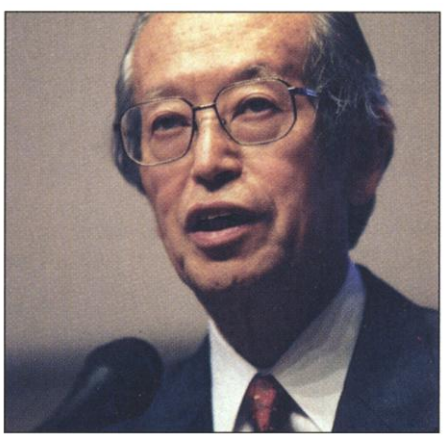
His efforts haven't gone unnoticed. Ken-Ichi Arai, a molecular biologist and director of the University of Tokyo's Institute of Medical Science, says "scientists are very grateful to him" for his work on the science and technology plans. And Yoshiki Hotta, director-general of the National Institute of Genetics in Mishima and a critic of the administration's four priorities, calls Omi "one of the few members of the Liberal Democratic Party who speak up for the importance of science and technology."

Omi came here last week to formally ask the United States to reconsider its 1999 decision to withdraw from the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) project. "It would be beneficial not only for the world but for the United States itself if the United States rejoined," he says. Omi met with Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, who said he would review the matter, and with members of Congress, who offered lukewarm support.

During his visit, Omi met with *Science*'s Jeffrey Mervis and spoke with *Science*'s Japan correspondent Dennis Normile by phone to discuss Japanese science policy. An edited transcript follows.

***Science**: What led to this new approach of prioritizing research?*

Omi: In recent years there has been criticism that our science and technology policy lacks any strategy. With the second Science and Technology Basic Plan, we decided to determine areas of interest. After extensive discussions we decided to allocate more funding and human resources in four areas, namely life sciences, information technology, the environment, and nanotechnology and materials science.



Straight talk. Japan's Koji Omi has clashed with some lab heads over their budgets.

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***Science**: Why those four fields?*

Omi: These areas were chosen [based] on what is going to be important for science and technology in Japan. We listened to the opinions of business and economic leaders and many other people.

***Science**: A group of laboratory heads criticized the four-field strategy in a letter to the prime minister. They are still not happy about the way next year's science budget has been divided up.*

Omi: I had the opportunity to meet with them and discuss this issue. But no matter how many times I told them that we are not neglecting basic research, I couldn't gain their understanding. However, if you really look at the [budget], you will understand that there is enough funding for basic research.

***Science**: The Koizumi administration would like to privatize or abolish a class of public corporations that includes research organizations such as the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research (RIKEN) and the Japan Marine Science and Technology Center. What will happen to them?*

Omi: The general plans regarding [the 163] public corporations may not apply to the [10 or so] scientific organizations. We continue to think that those organizations are very important for the development of science and technology.

***Science**: Does that mean you hope they will remain intact as they are now?*

Omi: Yes. But in some way we may have to modernize them.

***Science**: Is there a point after which U.S. participation in ITER would not be feasible because plans would be too far along?*

Omi: Even without U.S. participation, the three partners will proceed with this program. We are going to [decide] where the facility will be constructed and what roles the partners will play, and then proceed to implementation.

***Science**: What problems are hindering research at Japan's national universities, and how will the proposed denationalization address them?*

Omi: Those working at national universities are public servants. With that status they are not allowed to receive any money from private companies [as compensation] for research. The rules have been revised somewhat, but it is still difficult. If [the universities] are made independent agencies, [the faculty members will] no longer be public servants. That is something that many private companies urge us to do.

***Science**: What can be done to improve the situation for women faculty members?*

Omi: I do not believe women are in a disadvantageous position when it comes to promotion. Of course, if a woman decides to take several years off for child care, she has a lot of catching up to do later. However, as long as they work under the same conditions [as men], I do not believe there is any inequality. Actually, because there are fewer women in the workplace, women have a better chance of getting promoted.