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Biomedical Science and Its Administration

The committee charged with examining the National Institutes of Health has now made its report (*Science*, 26 March, p. 1556). The committee carried out its investigations diligently, and has prepared a well-written and well-organized document. Those who have had an opportunity to evaluate NIH will agree that "the activities of the National Institutes of Health are essentially sound and that its budget of approximately one billion dollars a year is, on the whole, being spent wisely. . . ." Many will also applaud the committee's statement, "We suspect that there are few, if any, one billion dollar segments of the Federal budget that are buying more valuable services for the American people than that administered by the National Institutes of Health."

There are additional laudatory comments; for example: "The NIH method of selecting recipients of its extramural grants . . . is an exceedingly good one. . . . admiration was almost as widespread among those whose applications had been rejected as among those who had succeeded in getting support."

However, the text goes on: "The early favorable remarks are not to be discounted, in this report, as simply a polite but meaningless preparation for the presentation of the seriously intended critical conclusions." But, a close reading of the report leaves me with much that impression.

The committee recommends many changes in the NIH administration of biomedical science, some of them far-reaching. The principal recommendation immediately affecting grantees is an increase in the role of university administrators. This is in line with a pattern already established. The more drastic recommendations center around the Institutes and their management. "A new advisory group should be established to assist the Office of the Director of NIH in the making of major plans and policies. . . ." In effect, the review committee seems to be saying that a full-time Director cannot be trusted to make plans. He must lean on a part-time advisory group. Yet at the same time the report recommends that the Director be given increased responsibilities in the management of the Institutes.

Fair-minded scientists will be distressed with the part of the report that deals with intramural activities. In many fields the Bethesda laboratories are world leaders, and they have fostered men who are now distinguished professors. Yet the report comes close to suggesting liquidation of this excellent establishment. "We recommend, as an early agenda item for the Policy and Planning Council, consideration of the amount of independent, university-like research that NIH should conduct intramurally. If reductions are decided on they should be carefully executed. . . ." This language has already produced apprehension among the intramural staff at NIH. A decrease in the budget at NIH would hasten the departure of many of the best men in all programs.

There is injustice in this situation. Fifteen years ago the intramural and extramural research programs were of equal magnitude. Since that time, both programs have been expanded, but the extramural activity has grown about five times more. It was the rate of increase in extramural support that drew criticism in Congress. It was this program that provided ammunition for the Fountain committee. It was criticism of the extramural program which led to appointment of the Wooldridge committee. No substantial fault had been found previously in the intramural program. Yet when the report comes out, it is the intramural activity that appears to be most threatened.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

(Copies of the Wooldridge report, "Biomedical Science and Its Administration," are available for \$1 from the U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.)