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Advancement of the Nation's Health

In principle, in a democracy all aspects of the performance of the Executive branch of the government should be subject to the informed scrutiny of the electorate. In practice, only a few facets are examined. The agencies of government are in part at fault for not issuing suitable reports. In part the complexities of government operations make thorough examination by the electorate impractical. This is especially true in the domain of science and technology. Thus the agencies operating in scientific areas have a special obligation to prepare simple, readable reports, and at least some scientists should read them.

A report* issued by the National Institutes of Health last July especially merits attention. It represents a major effort to inform the President, the Congress, and the public. It contains information important to policy-making. It presents a broad treatment of matters of great personal significance to every human being. It can be read with profit by any literate person and provides excellent orientation as to the current state of medical progress.

James Shannon, director of NIH, has been an astute and effective advocate of basic research. At the same time he has wisely and consistently protected basic research by emphasizing its relation to efforts to improve the practice of medicine. Nevertheless, at times NIH has been criticized as being insufficiently concerned with the application of the results of its research programs. In June 1966 President Johnson seemed dissatisfied when he said, at a meeting with directors of NIH, "We must make sure that no life-giving discovery is locked up in the laboratory. I plan to meet again in a few months with my health strategy council to review their plans and to establish our goals."

Faced with a major challenge to his policies, Shannon responded thoughtfully and with dignity. His report, prepared with the help of many key scientists in all the Institutes of NIH, is exemplary in its tone. It tells of successes. It describes failures. It avoids flim-flam and hoopla. Each Institute at NIH presents its case, often beginning with a statement of its mission. These statements remind one of the multitude of ills that beset mankind. The incidence of many diseases is surveyed, and their cost to society estimated. Progress toward finding cures for major diseases is described; so are the obstacles. The report also tells what is needed and what is planned in the way of further efforts. It gives many specific examples of medical problems, in which it is evident that hope for progress rests on continuing research. Thus, basic research is defended in an unusually effective way. The report also repeatedly demonstrates that NIH has been adequately concerned with meeting social needs.

Apparently President Johnson was among those who were convinced. At a visit to Bethesda in July 1967 (*Science*, 24 July) he described NIH as a billion-dollar success. Moreover, NIH is the only major agency supporting basic research whose appropriation this fiscal year has an appreciable chance of experiencing a substantial increase.

Medical research is fortunate in having a good case, but it is also fortunate in having spokesmen who, without condescension, can give the public an honest accounting that does not mortgage the future.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON

* *The Advancement of Knowledge for the Nation's Health: A Report to the President on the Research Programs of the National Institutes of Health* (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1967).