Peer Review: OMB May Dismantle NIH Study Sections

Washington is rife with rumors and secret reports these days and not all of them have to do with Watergate. One touches the biomedical community where it lives. Based on an internal government document, the rumor is that the peer review system by which research grant applications to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are evaluated by study sections is likely to be dismantled. No one is certain how imminent its rumored dismantling may be, but science leaders in Washington are convinced that there is a clear and present danger to the peer review system that is so cherished by the biomedical community.

The threat to peer review as it is practiced at NIH comes from the President's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) which is little understood and greatly feared. A few months ago, OMB officials prepared what is described as a "position paper" on the peer review system in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). Then they reportedly sent it to HEW Secretary Caspar Weinberger, former director of OMB. Weinberger passed it on to Charles C. Edwards, his assistant secretary for health, and Edwards transmitted it to the brass at NIH for comment.

Until recently, the very existence of the OMB paper was known to only a few insiders and, even now, copies are jealously guarded. However, *Science* has learned that the paper makes reference to various unidentified reports that allegedly criticize the peer review system for fostering cronyism among researchers, for being self-serving, and for being administratively inefficient. [Such charges, of course, are nothing new. For years, the peer review system has come under attack from time to time but has always been vindicated. The general conclusion of those who have looked at the system either officially or privately seems to be that, although it is not perfect, it is far better than any other idea (*Science*, 12 Jan.).]

Those "unidentified" reports apparently include the so-called Wooldridge study of the NIH, completed in 1965. According to some persons who have seen the OMB position paper, it gives the impression that the main point of this and other analyses of the NIH was a criticism of peer review, but that, says one man, "is simply not the case."

Hinting that the NIH may be shirking some of its administrative responsibilities by relying as heavily as it does on outside advice, the OMB paper makes some rather explicit suggestions for change. As it exists today, the peer review system at the NIH is built around some 50 study sections, each composed of 10 to 15 university-based scientists who meet three times a year to judge applications on their scientific merit and rank them in order of priority for funding. Their decisions are subsequently reviewed by advisory councils of the institutes which rarely take exception to judgments that study sections make. OMB officials are said to find this system, which involves altogether a couple of thousand individuals, "messy." In lieu of study sections, OMB has proposed two alternate plans. One would simply transfer responsibility for the evaluation of grant applications from the scientific community, as it is represented by study sections, to in-house officers of the NIH who would handle applications themselves. In a sense, this is analogous to the way research contracts are handled now. A second alternative proposes that NIH

Stone Reportedly New NIH Head

Who is Robert S. Stone? The question has been going around biomedical circles for the last week or so. At the spring meeting of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academy of Sciences, most people had heard the rumor that Stone will be named head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), succeeding Robert Q. Marston. But the majority knew nothing more about Stone than that. "Never heard of him before," was the most frequent answer to the "Who is Robert Stone?" query.

Stone is vice-president for health sciences and dean of the University of New Mexico School of Medicine in Albuquerque. According to those who do know him, including IOM president John R. Hogness, he is reputed to have done a better than average job of seeing the new medical school through periods of crisis during the last few years. A pathologist who did his specialty training at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, Stone was chairman of pathology at New Mexico before assuming the deanship. He got his undergraduate degree at Brooklyn College and his M.D. from the College of Medicine at the State University of New York Downstate Medical Center. Stone is 51 years old.

Stone is also a Republican and, for the last few months, has been a student of management science, two factors that are presumed to have been key qualifications in his winning the NIH appointment. On leave from New Mexico, Stone has been studying at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Predictably, a number of basic researchers seem disappointed by Stone's appointment. They had hoped to have someone more obviously committed to basic research in the top NIH job, on the one hand, and they have a general distrust of anyone who is a "manager," on the other. However, since nobody seems to know Stone, or very much about him, that judgment may be a bit premature. As Hogness, who was himself a dean and vice-president for health affairs for many years at the University of Washington, said of Stone's studies at M.I.T., "There is nothing wrong with a dean trying to learn how to do his job better."

Stone is expected to be in Washington by summer, although first his appointment must be announced officially. Routine clearance by the F.B.I. is said to be the only thing standing in the way.—B.J.C.

bureaucrats go about their business with the aid of "readers," outside scientists who would read grant applications sent to them and comment on them in writing. Readers would not necessarily know anything about other applications that were submitted in the same category and would, therefore, no longer make comparative judgments. There would, of course, be no more study section meetings.

The threatened abolition of study sections hits biomedical scientists hard. At the spring meeting of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) earlier this month, peer review was very much on everybody's mind. As far as its impact on the biomedical community is concerned, the destruction of study sections would make the demise of training grants look like child's play. Though training grants have been enormously important to the financial stability of medical schools and research institutions, the peer review system has been the central mechanism by which researchers as a group control their own professional lives. Peer review places responsibility for decision-making squarely within the scientific community, where most researchers believe it belongs.

The rumored abolition of peer review by study section first came up for formal discussion at a meeting of the institute's committee on science policy, chaired by Leon O. Jacobson, dean of medicine at the University of Chicago. Henry Kaplan of Stanford University proposed that the institute and the academy jointly offer to study the peer review system with an eye to recommending any appropriate reforms. He expressed a feeling that many scientists share when he said that study sections may be too limited in their approach to life in that they tend to act only as juries. It might be useful, Kaplan suggested, if study sections took the initiative in pointing out experiments in need of doing, areas of research deserving of special effort, and so forth. Daniel Tosteson of Duke University agreed with Kaplan, reemphasizing the idea that the institute offer to take a hard look at the situation.

Throughout an hour's discussion of the problem, people seemed intent on taking a sensible approach to the threat. Nobody suggested dashing a telegram off to the President and many opposed taking the matter to the press before they could have an opportunity to lay their case before Weinberger and Edwards. While it was apparent that the measure of concern institute members were feeling ran deep, the hysterical responses that characterized many biologists' reactions to the training grant abolition was notably absent among these people who are desperately hoping to affect policy.

The most outspoken statement on the threat to peer review as it is known came the second day of the institute meeting when academy president Philip Handler addressed institute members at his own request. Until now, Handler has been relatively silent on health policy matters that have come up since the beginning of the year but he decided not to keep his peace any longer.

The very foundation of the biomedical research enterprise, Handler said in a brief extemporaneous speech, rests on open competition for research support. Now that the national cancer and heart institutes are channeling more and more of their resources into directed research through contracts, there is less and less chance for the individual researcher, especially the young. With more and more centrally directed research through contracts, institutions themselves are becoming the principal investigators in many cases, he noted, and went on to point out that by curtailing opportunities for broad participation in scientific decision-making, one opened the way for "small mistakes to become colossal mistakes." Acknowledging that the system erected by the NIH may not be perfect, Handler declared that it is preferable to "benevolent despotism which we have learned not to trust." He concluded by declaring that "this town is rife with rumors that the peer review system is about to be destroyed. If there is such a threat, it is the greatest so far to this remarkable biomedical research establishment." After his speech, Handler said that the issue should be brought to the attention of appropriate congressional staffs, particularly in view of the fact that there is no longer a science adviser to the President to whom one can go with issues that need to be dealt with above the departmental level.

Later that afternoon, the council of the Institute of Medicine passed a resolution urging its president, John R. Hogness, and Handler, to prepare a joint statement to the effect that no changes be made in the peer review system without a thorough study.

—BARBARA J. CULLITON

Rio Blanco: Stimulating Gas and Conflict in Colorado

Project Rio Blanco, a gas stimulation experiment in western Colorado involving three simultaneous 30-kiloton nuclear explosions in a single well, is regarded by critics of current national energy policies as fresh evidence of just how confused those policies can be. Barring a court injunction, the Rio Blanco shot will have been held on 17 May, just as this issue of *Science* is appearing. Environmentalists and certain other interests have been protesting the project, but, if this first nuclear detonation should in itself do significant damage, many of the protesters themselves will be surprised. What they principally are afraid of are the several hundreds, or indeed several thousands, of gas stimulation shots that might *conceivably* follow if the results of the initial detonation come up to the expectations of project sponsors.

Yet, in truth, even officials of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), to say nothing of political leaders in Colorado and other Western states where "tight" gas-bearing rock formations occur, are in no little doubt whether conducting such large num-