

SCIENCE FUNDING

Peer Review Catches Congressional Flak

What happens when research projects that have already flown past peer review get caught in a Capitol Hill crossfire? They get turned into clay pigeons: targets for the anger of powerful congressmen. That's just what happened last week, when the Senate passed a bill sponsored by appropriations committee chairman Robert C. Byrd (D-WV) that would block funding for 34 research projects set to be funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH)—projects already approved by peer review. Byrd took aim at the projects in retaliation for attempts by the Bush Administration to ax several research projects that Congress had tried to stuff into the budgets of various federal agencies.

The scientific community has responded angrily. "A political battle is being fought on the backs of scientists," says Ernest Eliel, president of the American Chemical Society (ACS), which has received dozens of calls from irate members even though most of the targeted grants are not in chemistry but in the social sciences. "This time it's the behavioral scientists, next time it could be our scientists being used as a political football," says Kathleen A. Ream, a legislative affairs expert at the ACS.

At the heart of the contretemps is the question of whether politicians or scientists should determine which research projects are funded with tax dollars. "Right away this tells me that what we've held near and dear—the peer-review system—could well go right down the tubes," says Jack Lein, vice president of health sciences at the University of Washington, which holds two of the three threatened NIH grants.

The controversy began with a Bush Administration plan to cut \$30 million in funding for 67 projects that the White House regards as examples of porkbarrel science (*Science*, 27 March, p. 1635). The Senate response was that "two can play this game," says an appropriations staffer. The retaliatory cuts are part of a Senate bill passed last week that would trim \$8.3 billion from the 1992 federal budget. (The House rescission bill calls for \$5.8 billion in cuts but leaves alone peer-reviewed NSF and NIH grants.)

According to a Senate appropriations staffer, Byrd and Representative William Natcher (D-KY), a powerful member of the House committee on appropriations, in March ordered committee staffers to comb federally funded research for projects that didn't fulfill "certain criteria." The criteria were: encouraging U.S. competitiveness; leading to economic development; being in areas of critical technologies; and leading to a basic understanding of fundamental science. In a speech before the Senate on 5 May, Byrd said he felt that "while there

might be some theoretical value for these items, the American taxpayers may wonder why their hard-earned money is being spent on these items." Among the 31 NSF grants are such titles as "The late prehistoric political economy of the Upper Mantaro Valley in Peru" and "Historical study of Japan's famous slogan 'Rich nation, strong army.'"

Byrd also criticized three NIH grants, totaling \$367,000, for research on dental pain and fear. Byrd said, "Common sense tells me that everybody fears going to the dentist.... So we do not need to waste money to study that." The study's principal investigator, Peter Milgrom, director of the Dental Fears Research Clinic at the University of Washington, explains that his project aims to identify mental illness that might underlie fear of the dentist. "The principle is that we all compete in a highly rigorous way for funds," says Milgrom. "Not only are projects reviewed for scientific

merit, but for their social benefit, too."

Several scientific organizations, including ACS and the American Psychological Association, have sent letters to Congress denouncing the proposed cuts. "I think they'd underestimated the level of dismay that would occur in the scientific community," says John D. Holmfeld, executive director of the Council of Scientific Society Presidents, which at its annual meeting last week drafted a protest letter stating that the Senate bill "would negate the carefully considered process of merit-based scientific judgments."

The letter writers are hoping to persuade a House-Senate conference committee to retain funding for the projects when it approves a final version of the rescission bills—an action expected to occur this week, after *Science* went to press. Meanwhile, there's a lesson here, says Herb Simon, a Carnegie-Mellon economist who won the Nobel Prize for economics in 1978. "We ought to learn that when we write down a title of a project, it should reflect the importance of the research."

—Richard Stone

THE GALLO PROBE

Did OSI Rewrite History?

Officials at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have made a strenuous effort to end the agency's long-running scientific misconduct investigation of intramural AIDS researcher Robert Gallo (*Science*, 8 May, p. 735), but critics are lining up to punch holes in NIH's final report of its investigation. Chief among them is Suzanne Hadley, who led the investigation for NIH's Office of Scientific Integrity (OSI) until last July, when NIH Director Bernadine Healy removed her from the case (*Science*, 26 July 1991, p. 372). Despite a spate of press reports that Gallo has been "vindicated" of stealing the AIDS virus from French researchers at the Pasteur Institute, the former investigator—who is now working part time for Representative John Dingell (D-MI)—now claims that NIH is attempting to "rewrite" the history of its Gallo probe and has failed to investigate thoroughly whether or not Gallo could have misappropriated the virus.

Hadley's main charge is that OSI has attempted to close the issue of misappropriation prematurely—even though it has spent 2 years on its investigation. In a statement issued last October, for instance, OSI declared that Gallo had "no need" to misappropriate the French virus because he had viral isolates from other sources. These conclusions, the statement said, were "determined and announced previously" as a result of a preliminary inquiry in the case conducted by Hadley, OSI director Jules Hallum, and two virologists from other agencies in the federal government. Not true, says Hadley. Her draft report, written last summer, concluded only

that "the issue of misappropriation has not been resolved" and predicted that sequencing studies of viral samples from Gallo's lab "will shed additional light on the matter."

Those studies, Hadley says, show that Gallo used the French isolate for three important sets of experiments, whether knowingly or accidentally. Moreover, she says, while OSI's final report contains a 23-page discussion confirming that Gallo did have other isolates, it never even asks—much less answers—a pivotal question: Could Gallo have actually used any of these other isolates to make the AIDS blood test when he did? "To talk about isolates in the abstract without considering when he had them and could use them obscures the really crucial question of whether he had a motive to misappropriate," she says. "I'm not saying Bob [Gallo] or Mika [Popovic, a former Gallo aide] stole the virus. But it's an open question."

It's a question that Dingell is likely to explore in coming weeks, especially since Hadley claims that OSI's own evidence shows that Gallo had no other usable isolates available at the crucial time. Gallo's lawyer Joseph Onk disagrees, noting that other isolates in the lab were available, although they would have taken weeks to grow. And OSI director Hallum contends that "we did everything we could" to explore the issue of misappropriation and argues that the matter really comes down to whether Gallo had "other viruses in his lab that he could have put into [permanent] culture"—which, Hallum says, he did.

—David P. Hamilton