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EDITORIAL

Individual-Initiated Public Policy

In this issue of *Science*, we initiate an experiment in the development of public policy. It is notable in the history of mankind that science continues from generation to generation to be innovative, whereas the governments of institutions and countries have had trouble sustaining creativity. It is perhaps worthwhile to examine the differences between scientific processes and government consensus building to arrive at suggestions for improvements in government policy-making.

In the field of public policy, individuals frequently have innovative ideas. In the process of consensus building, however, each new idea becomes modified to satisfy the needs of various constituencies. It is rare that the final concept that is tested resembles the initial innovative proposal. The larger the constituency affected, the more difficult it becomes to find the imagination within the final legislation.

In the field of scientific research, both ancient and modern research has been investigator-initiated. An individual scientist with a brilliant idea would, in the good old days when things were cheap, simply go to a back-room laboratory and carry out experiments on his or her own. As research has become more complex, grant applications must be made, but still no one needs a consensus of ten or twelve learned individuals to be allowed to originate an idea or submit a grant. To get grant approval, scientists do depend on committees, but these committees are prejudiced in favor of rewarding innovation and have a tradition against simply maintaining the status quo. The concepts and ramifications of the initial idea are published and subjected to criticism and appraisal by fellow workers to generate progress. In most cases this process results in a finely honed successful theory or experimental procedure. Therefore, it seems appropriate to try to apply the process of scientific discovery to public policy by inviting individuals to publish suggestions on public policy. The publications could then be commented on by others, further refined, and perhaps ultimately adopted by committees that might not have done so without such exposure and refinement.

This process had a chance to be tested when Dr. Bernadine Healy, the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), announced her decision to develop a strategic plan for NIH and instituted a number of regional meetings to encourage ideas from scientists. In this issue we print the essence of the speech she gave to those national meetings, and we invite individuals* to send suggestions with regard to NIH on any aspect of policy, whether in areas of research emphasis, organization of review panels, relative values of program-oriented versus investigator-oriented ideas, or the many areas suggested by Dr. Healy's speech. *Science* will publish a selection of those responses that seem to be the most innovative, and, thereby, foster an exchange of ideas. We will forward all correspondence to Dr. Healy unless the writer specifically asks us not to. That way an individual will know that his or her ideas have been heard whether or not they appear in print. *Science* will have to select letters because of space limitations but will do so on the basis of originality of the ideas and the cogency with which they are presented. Selection will be made to avoid redundancy and provide diversity. *Science* is mindful of the meeting of the Golden Gate Bridge directors, at which a citizen in the back of the room, on hearing about budget problems, suggested a salary savings by charging tolls only in one direction. Everyone laughed at first, but a few said, "Maybe it will work." The idea has now been implemented, not only in California, but also in other parts of the world. Truly original ideas may provoke laughter at first, but they are frequently the best in the long run.

In the present case, Dr. Healy's announcement that she wanted a new strategic plan for NIH and this editor's desire to test the idea of the "individual-initiated public policy" created a perfect symbiosis in which the idea and its usefulness could be evaluated. In a sense we are undertaking a social experiment to see whether a new tool can be helpful to public policy-makers in widely diverse areas.

The true innovator is reluctant to expend time because of fear that the bureaucracy will make his or her efforts futile. Bureaucrats hesitate to support innovators until they are certain their proposals are economically practical, not just superficially attractive. Perhaps the new social experiment will provide a device to allow the originality of the innovator and the practicality of the implementer to work together. Let us begin.

Daniel E. Koshland, Jr.

* Responses can be mailed or faxed to *Science* (202-408-8026).