

## OFFICE OF AIDS RESEARCH

# Panel Urges NIH to Loosen Its Grip on AIDS Research

A massive, yearlong review of the U.S. AIDS research enterprise has concluded that, at age 15, it is ready for a critical rite of passage: more independence from its parent, the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The review, whose findings are being released this week,\* was conducted by more than 100 scientists from academia and industry, plus a handful of community representatives. They were brought in by NIH's Office of AIDS Research (OAR) to analyze every aspect of the country's \$1.4 billion AIDS research portfolio and offer "a blueprint" for restructuring it.

The final report, written by a "working group" that oversaw the review, calls for research dollars to be shifted to the extramural research community, partly by redirecting money from work that is now categorized as AIDS-related but has little or no connection to the disease. The report also recommends creating a new trans-NIH AIDS vaccine program "with leadership and oversight provided by distinguished, nongovernment scientists." And, in addition to a general call for more "scientific oversight and review by nongovernment scientists," it suggests that nine new groups be formed to oversee or reshape nearly every aspect of AIDS research (see table). Many of these recommendations were reported by *Science* last month (2 February, p. 590).

The congressionally mandated review coincides with the growing sentiment that thwarting HIV is a more difficult scientific challenge than many researchers once imagined. "The AIDS research community is at a transition," says Phillip Sharp, a Nobel Prize-winning molecular biologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who was a member of the working group. "Now we're at a stage of strapping down for the longer attack on the problem." Working group member Don Des Jarlais, head of research at New York's Chemical Dependency Institute, says he anticipates that the review will have a significant impact, in part because it has the support of OAR Director William Paul and NIH Director Harold Varmus. "There are two powerful people to make it work," says Des Jarlais. Indeed, Paul says the report "provides an opportunity

for scientists to make an impact on the direction that AIDS research needs to take, particularly at this critical time in the evolution of the epidemic."

The recommendations of the working group, informally known as the "Levine committee" because it was co-chaired by Princeton University molecular biologist Arnold Levine, largely stem from evaluations conducted by six "area review panels" that focused on specific research areas. Their consensus, the Levine committee reports, is that investigator-initiated research should get a big boost.

Noting that investigator-initiated research wins only 20% of the AIDS budget, compared to 50% of NIH's non-AIDS spending, the report says NIH has "tended to manage AIDS research with more direct scientific control than other research portfolios." That may have been the right approach when the epidemic was younger, the report says, but "[g]iven the maturation of the field and the nature of the contemporary research needs, the continuation of this approach represents an impediment to progress." To remedy this, the report recommends that NIH approximately double investigator-initiated research dollars and issue fewer contracts, requests for applications, and collaborative agreements.

The Levine committee also says NIH should redirect dollars from projects that are "only peripherally related" to AIDS, such as one for developing artificial blood substitutes (an HIV blood test has protected the blood supply since 1985). Indeed, the committee calls miscategorization of AIDS research a "major issue" and "strongly" recommends that NIH revamp its coding system "immediately." Des Jarlais stresses that such a change is imperative. "Non-AIDS research funded with AIDS money is like pornography," says Des Jarlais. "It's hard to define exactly, but you know it when you see it—and it's offensive."

The working group hopes that more extramural funds will attract new researchers to the field. But in one area, it calls for a more aggressive approach to recruiting top talent: "Many of the most capable immunologists have not committed major efforts to AIDS research," the working group states, and recommends that OAR convene a series of workshops with expert immunologists to speed this "underrepresented" area.

In perhaps its boldest recommendation, the Levine committee says the "entire AIDS vaccine research effort of the NIH should be restructured." The impetus for this overhaul, the working group writes, is that "centralized leadership" is needed to speed the vaccine search, which to date "has received less funding and attention than other areas of AIDS research." Until now, each NIH institute has pursued its own vaccine program, with the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) effectively leading the search because it has the largest AIDS vaccine budget. The working group now recommends establishing an AIDS Vaccine Research Committee as an independent entity on the NIAID campus. Although most members of this committee would be "outstanding nongovernment scientists," it would also include representatives from NIH branches with major AIDS vaccine programs.

The \$1.4 billion question now is how the report's many recommendations will be translated into action. "This [would be] a big culture shift for the NIH," says AIDS activist Mark Harrington, a working group member. As *Science* went to press, the OAR's Advisory Council was planning to meet to evaluate the report. If the council signs off on it, as expected, the OAR would then hash out an implementation plan with the various NIH branches and get it rolling. The working group recognizes that this is easier said than done and therefore concludes that it is "imperative" that an implementation plan be developed "immediately" so that the recommendations can affect the 1997 and 1998 AIDS research budgets, which OAR is currently drafting.

—Jon Cohen

PROPOSED OVERSIGHT PANELS	
Group	Goal
Coordinating Committee on Training and Infrastructure	Recruit outstanding new investigators to AIDS research
AIDS Vaccine Research Committee	Lead, direct, and oversee comprehensive AIDS vaccine effort
National AIDS Vaccine Task Force	White House-level coordination of all government-sponsored vaccine programs
Extramural Expert Panel to Review New Plan for HIV Vaccine Efficacy Trials Network (HIVNET)	Determine whether to retarget HIVNET money to other areas
HIV Prevention Science Advisory Committee	Coordinate behavioral, biomedical, and social interventions
Oversight Committee for all NIH-sponsored AIDS Clinical Trials	Provide scientific direction, prevent unnecessary overlap, identify needed resources
External Scientific Advisory Board to Guide NCI Drug Discovery Program	Review management and structure to substantially decrease current funding
Ad hoc Advisory Group for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)	Help identify promising and potentially dangerous CAM therapies
Regional Primate Research Centers (RPRC) Review Panel	Provide equal access to nonhuman primate models to researchers outside of RPRC

\* "NIH AIDS Research Program Evaluation," Office of AIDS Research, NIH.