



BIOMEDICAL FUNDING

NIH Embraces Citizens' Council To Cool Debate on Priorities

The hottest ticket in Washington, D.C., right now isn't for a Redskins game—and not just because the city's hapless football team isn't having much of a season. If you belong to a biomedical research pressure group, the most sought-after seat in town may be on a new National Institutes of Health (NIH) advisory council, to be known as the Director's Council of Public Representatives (COPR). The panel, whose outlines began to take shape last week, is meant to ease tensions between NIH and dissatisfied patient-advocacy groups. But it doesn't look as though seats are being reserved for the most disgruntled of the specific-disease lobbies.

Some of these groups complain that funding decisions at NIH are based too much on political concerns and too little on the severity of particular diseases. They took their complaints to Capitol Hill, and Congress last year asked for a review by the Institute of Medicine (IOM). An IOM panel delivered its judgment in July: NIH needs to do a better job of explaining its priorities and talking to the public (*Science*, 10 July, p. 152).

NIH director Harold Varmus held a daylong brainstorming session last week with 23 people from outside NIH, heavily weighted with patients or their relatives, to explore how the new council of citizen advisers should function and how its members should be chosen. No sharp blueprint emerged from the 23 September meeting, but Varmus said afterward that "I got some very good advice." He hopes to name COPR members in time for the council to hold its first meeting next spring.

COPR alone won't make research-funding controversies go away, of course. Many specific-disease advocacy groups "still believe ... that NIH funding priorities do not correspond to the severity of the diseases that

they represent," said Alan Brownstein, president and chief executive officer of the American Liver Foundation, early in the meeting. Staking a claim on this year's expected budget increase—NIH's funding is likely to rise more than 12%, to more than \$15 billion, in the new year that began on 1 October—Brownstein said NIH now can "correct" past inequities without harming existing research programs. As if to underline that message, cancer research advocates staged a "March to Conquer Cancer" on the Washington Mall the following weekend, calling for increased



Popular cause. Marchers in Washington, D.C., made a pitch last week for more government funds for cancer research.

spending on cancer research.

Creation of COPR was one of a dozen recommendations by the IOM committee that studied how NIH sets priorities. In its 8 July report, the panel endorsed NIH's existing criteria for allocating research funding—public health needs, scientific quality, potential for scientific progress, research-portfolio diversification, and infrastructure support. But it said NIH should do a better job of describing the process and called on NIH to "strengthen its analysis and use of health data, such as the burdens and costs of diseases." This could force NIH to make explicit correlations between particular diseases and research expenditures, an idea that

NIH officials found "troubling."

At first glance, COPR might appear to be a fifth wheel bolted into the NIH organizational chart alongside the more traditional Advisory Committee to the Director, composed mostly of scientists, physicians, and executives of research institutions. But Varmus may find a layperson-oriented, patient-oriented panel quite useful. For example, he plans to involve the new council in figuring out how to quantify the costs and burdens of various diseases and how to weigh disease burden in deciding research priorities. The issue is now under study in Varmus's Office of Science Policy. "At the very least," Varmus says, "I would expect COPR to hear about the [policy] office's work and give me advice about the credibility of such analyses and about how they might be used."

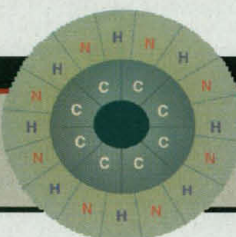
Panelists at Varmus's 23 September meeting suggested a variety of other roles for COPR, not all of them consistent. Among them: COPR could serve as a way for NIH to promote itself to the public or as a means to call NIH's attention to public concerns that are not being met. It might check whether funding decisions by individual institutes truly reflect NIH's stated criteria, but it should not serve as a court of appeals. Varmus said he hopes COPR will help NIH achieve better accountability "without turning meetings into divisive debate among constituencies that would like bigger shares of the pie."

To give the new council credibility, Varmus plans an unusually open process for choosing its members: Selection criteria will be clearly stated, and a panel of outsiders will screen candidates. But he doesn't want "a United Nations" representing every constituency that deals with NIH. Such a group would be "too large, too unwieldy, and frankly, too provincial." Nor does he want simply to round up "the usual suspects"—prominent advocates for major disease and patient groups.

The makeup of the planning group invited to last week's meeting may provide a model: It included former patients, relatives of patients, current or former members of institute advisory councils, a representative of a major scientific society, and several patient-advocacy group representatives—but not those who have been most loudly challenging "inequitable" funding decisions, such as the Parkinson's Action Network or the American Diabetes Association.

The IOM committee didn't include scientists among the groups that it said COPR

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should represent, but Varmus almost certainly will put a scientist on COPR. Scientists "are one of our major constituencies," he said last week, and several panelists agreed. "I would like to see the scientific lion lie down with the public lamb," said Robert Abendroth of the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Foundation.

"Or vice versa," said Varmus.

—BRUCE AGNEW

Bruce Agnew is a writer in Bethesda, Maryland.

KENYA

Leakey Back as Head of Wildlife Service

Politics has again created strange bedfellows in Kenya. Just a week after ousting conservationist David Western as head of the embattled Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), President Daniel arap Moi has reappointed one of his most prominent critics—anthropologist Richard Leakey—to the job of overseeing some of Africa's best known parks and protecting the country's rich biodiversity. The move comes just 4 years after Moi picked Western to replace Leakey, who resigned from the KWS in 1994 after complaining of political interference by Moi's cronies.

The latest switch, announced on 24 September, marks yet another twist in a political tale that has captivated and concerned conservationists around the world (*Science*, 25 September, p. 1931). In May, Moi fired Western, only to rehire him 6 days later following complaints from international donors and conservationists who supported Western's efforts to downsize the KWS and involve people living outside the agency's 53 parks in conservation. Some of Western's supporters charged that the ouster had been engineered by Leakey, who has been critical of Western's community-based wildlife policies and management style. At the time, Western himself ascribed the firing primarily to his opposition to granting mining concessions in the parks.

When Moi abruptly fired Western again on 17 September, few observers publicly predicted that the president would try to woo one of his leading opponents back into the government. In the past, Moi has reportedly called Leakey a "racist" and "arrogant" and

has threatened to have him arrested for sedition. And since January, Leakey has been a member of Parliament representing the Safina party, a small but vocal opposition group. On 24 September, however, Leakey announced he was reclaiming his old job after direct negotiations with Moi assured him that KWS would be insulated from political meddling. "I did due diligence and believe I have the government's commitment," Leakey told *Science*. "Obviously, one does not knowingly put his head in a noose," he commented at an earlier press conference.

Some observers say Leakey's reinstatement was primarily driven by Moi's increasingly frenetic efforts to shore up his sagging regime and Kenya's shattered economy. In particular, says Gilbert Khadiagala, a Kenyan who teaches African politics at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., Moi has sought to regain support among Kenya's powerful Kikuyu ethnic group as political parties begin talks over a new democratic constitution that could sharply curtail his Kanu party's power, and as the government negotiates an aid package with the International Monetary Fund. Last



Full circle. Richard Leakey gets old job back.

month Moi took one step toward that goal by politically rehabilitating Charles Njonjo, a Kikuyu elder statesman, by naming him chair of the KWS board of directors. Njonjo, whom Moi forced into internal exile in 1984, is Leakey's lifelong friend and mentor. One likely scenario, Khadiagala says, is that Moi brought Leakey into the government to provide Njonjo with a trusted ally and to demonstrate to foreign governments that he is ready to share power. "The appointment makes Moi look like a moderate, not an ethnic leader," Khadiagala says.

Kenyan politics aside, Western's supporters are concerned that Leakey—who focused on protecting animals within the parks during his first stint as KWS chief—will undo Western's community conservation programs, which attempt to preserve biodiversity in areas around the parks. "The worry is that Leakey will return to policies that are no longer supported by conservation science," says University of California, San Diego, biologist David Woodruff. Some donors also fear an abrupt shift. "There is quite a lot of donor concern," says a knowledgeable

source. Funders such as the European Union and Germany, which have pumped millions of dollars into the community projects and other reform efforts, "would like to be assured by the new management that major changes are not going to take place."

Leakey, who says he "can't imagine why donors should have any concern about changes," says his first priority will be to find funds to pay off a \$3.5 million deficit, caused largely by declining tourism and the end of some outside grants to KWS. "We simply don't have any incoming money to pay bills and salaries," he told *Science*. "We are going to have to cut costs."

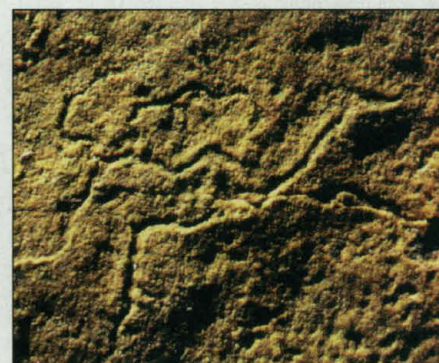
—DAVID MALAKOFF

PALEONTOLOGY

Tracks of Billion-Year-Old Animals?

Could paleontologists have missed a third of the preserved history of animals? That's the implication of a startling claim on page 80. Researchers have grown accustomed to competing claims about when multicellular animals first appeared. In February, new fossil embryos from China pushed the date back tens of millions of years to just before 600 million years ago (*Science*, 6 February, p. 803), and some molecular biologists sorting through animals' genes have inferred an even earlier origin. Now the new find may extend the fossil record of animals more than 400 million years to 1.1 billion years ago, supporting the oldest molecular estimates of the origins of animals.

In this issue of *Science*, an international team of scientists argues that wiggly grooves on the surface of ancient sandstone from central India are the tracks of burrowing,



The first burrows? Half-centimeter-wide grooves in sandstone from India may push the origin of animals back almost half a billion years.