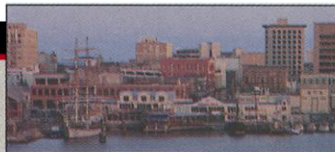


NIH plans minority health initiative



Texas builds tropical disease powerhouse



Double standards at Yucca Mountain

able to "restore a youthful state" to the donor cell's nucleus. But he cautions, "What you want to know is, will these cloned animals live longer?" The scientists will have to wait a while to answer that question, as sheep can live 12 years and cows about 20.

No one is yet able to explain the difference between Dolly and the cloned calves. It might be due to random variation, species differences, a difference in the cell type, or different methods of nuclear transfer. Telomere expert Jerry Shay of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas hypothesizes that starting with relatively short telomeres in the senescent cells might prompt the early embryo to overcompensate and grow unusually long telomeres.

Whatever caused the difference, the Lanza team's results are consistent with preliminary findings of two other groups. In as yet unpublished work, Xiangzhong Yang of the University of Connecticut, Storrs, has found that the telomeres in calves cloned from adult cells were of at least normal length. And Teruhiko Wakayama of The Rockefeller University in New York City says that he, with colleagues in Hawaii and Japan, found a similar pattern in telomeres of cloned mice.

The researchers hope the findings will provide insights into the source of the egg cell's rejuvenating power. "Ultimately we want to understand how that reprogramming goes on in the oocyte so we could do it in vitro" and skip the embryo stage, Martin says. Several groups are working toward that goal, hoping to produce replacement tissues without the ethical baggage.

—GRETCHEN VOGEL

BIOMEDICAL POLICY

NIH Nomination on Hold for This Year

Four months after Harold Varmus resigned as director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the agency has learned that it will have to go without a permanent chief for at least the rest of this year and probably for part of 2001. Deputy NIH director Ruth Kirschstein, a veteran research manager and former head of the National

Institute of General Medical Sciences, who took charge of NIH in January, will continue as acting chief.

A federal official confirmed last week that Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala urged the Administration not to nominate a permanent replacement for Varmus at this time, and that White House officials agreed. In addition, sources say, Shalala consulted with the leading candidate for the NIH job, whose name has not been disclosed officially but privately is acknowledged to be Gerald Fischbach, director of NIH's National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. Varmus recruited Fischbach to NIH in 1998



As you were. Prospective nominee Fischbach (top) and acting director Kirschstein.

from his position as chair of the departments of neurobiology at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Shalala and the candidate "mutually agreed" that it would be best not to send his name to the Senate for confirmation, the source said, primarily because time is running out for the Clinton Administration.

Fischbach and NIH officials aren't discussing the decision. But a Senate democratic aide who follows NIH affairs says that "NIH people were up here last week," explaining that they had shelved the nomination because of the "short time frame for moving a name through the Senate." In a nomination hearing, the aide said, "any nominee would have to expect tough questions regarding the use of fetal tissue and embryonic stem cells." Even if the review went smoothly, the new NIH director would have only a few months in office before the arrival of a new Administration—and possibly a move to change NIH's leadership. The decision to stick with the status quo, the Senate aide argued, is also a "vote of confidence" in NIH and "a recognition that Kirschstein is getting high marks for her handling of the job."

—ELIOT MARSHALL

NATIONAL ACADEMIES

Task Force Tinkers With Research Council

After several years of public turbulence, the U.S. national academies of science and engineering are about to embark on some private upheaval. The chiefs of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and its sister groups, the National Academy of Engineering (NAE) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM), have set their sights on restructuring the National Research Council (NRC), the huge think tank-like operation responsible for most of the reports, meetings, and workshops carried out each year by the academies.

A 15-member task force, chaired by retired Howard Hughes Medical Institute president Purnell Choppin and retired Honeywell vice president Gerald Dinneen, was formed in August 1998 and began meeting last spring. Its fourth and final session is scheduled for next month, with a report due in August. On the agenda are proposals that would streamline the Byzantine NRC structure, raise additional revenue from state governments and other nonfederal sources, and extend its influence beyond its bread-and-butter reports on topics ranging from defending the country against nuclear attacks to improving minority health care.

"It won't be wallpaper," predicts Mary Jane Osborn, a microbiologist at the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington and a member of the task force. But neither will it be as radical as the last review, instituted by then-NAS president Frank Press in 1981, that redrew the entire NRC map. "The layers of approval [for individual NRC reports] need streamlining, not removal," says NAS president Bruce Alberts, who also chairs the NRC.

There is widespread agreement that some sort of an overhaul is long overdue. The NRC, created in 1916, produces about 200 reports a year with help from a full-time staff of about 1000. However, its revenues—

"It's not going to be simple to get members to recognize that changes will be good."

—Bruce Alberts