

The NIH and Political Pressures

The National Institutes of Health have been in the news even more than usual in recent months. This has been due to a number of factors, including the vacancy in the office of the Director of the overall NIH, the long search for a new director, and the protracted formal approval and appointment process relating to Dr. James B. Wyngaarden once he had been selected. The news interest also has been due to the present vacancy of five of the individual Institute directorships and a sixth that will open up in the next few weeks.

Such "power vacuums" are natural stimuli for gossip and news media speculation—especially when they occur in the political hot-bed that is Washington, D.C.

But lately, the NIH has also been frequently in the news for another reason; namely, the current Congressional efforts to cut federal spending and to reduce the budgetary deficit. Without quoting statistics, it can be simply said that the NIH has not escaped major surgery with respect to its budgetary requests and perceived monetary needs.

All of this serves to remind us of the strong advocacy on the part of many pharmaceutical scientists about 10 to 15 years ago for the creation of a new, separate Institute to be devoted specifically to the pharmaceutical sciences. Presumably, such a new body would concentrate its research efforts and its extramural research funding on such subjects as improved drug delivery systems, pharmacokinetics, bioavailability, and related matters. However, the proposal never "caught fire," and eventually it fell by the wayside.

In retrospect, that may have been fortunate, although no one felt so at the time.

When the separate Institute proposal was first made and championed, federal support for health research generally and for the NIH in particular was flowing like the proverbial waters of Niagara. Today, however, the climate has changed dramatically.

The overall NIH budget and the budgets of the individual Institutes are presently undergoing fierce assaults. The only reason that deeply severe, or perhaps even mortal, fiscal surgery has not occurred is due to the strong support of powerful friends in Congress. When an influential Congressional Committee Chairman takes on a self-appointed and self-assumed role as protector and advocate of one or another of the respective Institutes, it can be safely predicted that the body will fare reasonably well.

And with the various pet diseases of individual Congressional leaders, it is not surprising that the Cancer Institute, or the Heart Institute, or the Aging Institute, or whichever, has managed to avoid wholesale cut-backs. Right or wrong, a fact of life in Washington is that no project, program, cause, or activity will go far or last very long unless it is the beneficiary of a strong lobbying force and potent Congressional allies.

Given the reality that any National Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences could not begin to command such political support, its budget would immediately become fair game in the fiscal maneuvering. In turn, such ax-wielding would mean that pharmaceutical research and pharmaceutical scientists would take the brunt of eliminated research projects and terminations in employment.

Moreover, given the hindsight of historical experience, it is probably unfortunate that the present individual Institutes were ever created. Less interagency rivalry, less duplication of administrative management, less petty jockeying for resources and publicity, and less wastage in many other areas, would have resulted if there were only a single "National Institute of Health." Experience has shown that independence and strong individual identity among these multiple components are not always conducive to the most efficient and effective operation of our nation's major health research program.

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