

Sparing Science from the Budget Ax

For months, Republicans in Congress have been targeting federal science and health agencies for deep cuts or outright elimination. Legislators are now at the brink of voting on the compromise GOP budget plan, and it looks like some agencies might be spared. Most notably, the Department of Energy (DOE) will be saved from elimination. Under one of the House's original plans, the DOE would have been dismantled and many of its 30 national laboratories would have been sold. The current House-Senate compromise plan will keep the DOE operational, but the agency will still face \$10 billion of spending cuts over the next seven years with sharp reductions in corporate research subsidies.

On the health forefront, Appropriations Committee Chairman Mark O. Hatfield (R-Ore.) may become the saviour of research budgets. He has proposed amendments that would reverse cuts recommended by the congressional budget committees in the National Institutes of Health's budget. (The House proposed a 5% cut for 1996 followed by a 6-year freeze, and the Senate proposed about a 10% cut.)

Researchers, themselves, have begun to lobby Congress to save funding. Testifying before the Senate Special Committee on Aging, Richard Besdine of the University of Connecticut Health Center asserted that there was economic justification for an increase—rather than a decrease—in research funding: He said a five-year delay in the age at which Alzheimer's disease strikes could save \$50 billion annually in medical and other costs. Other researchers have cited similar figures for delaying the onset of cardiovascular disease, strokes and Parkinson's disease.

The list of health casualties in the compromise budget plan still runs long: More than 60 % of the \$898 billion of savings projected through 2002 will come from Medicare and Medicaid, the national health insurance programs for the elderly and poor as well as child nutrition programs, food stamps, welfare benefits and student loans.

OVERHEARD

▲ As a result of budget cutbacks and regulation changes, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has decided to lower licensing fees for the fiscal year 1995: Broad scope medical licensees will be charged \$23,200 instead of \$32,600. Radiography licensees will pay \$13,900 down from \$19,200.

—Nuclear Regulatory Commission

▲ One out of every four volunteers in current federally-funded medical research trials at U.S. hospitals are participating without their knowledge, according to a survey conducted by the President's Advisory Committee on Human Radiation. About one-fifth of the unwitting participants were involved in experiments that posed more than a minimal health risk, and some had even signed consent forms.

—The Washington Post

▲ Harvard researchers documented 334 errors in the administration of all types of drugs in six months at two top Boston hospitals. Doctors who prescribed wrong doses or missed patient allergies were responsible for 39% of the errors, while nurses' and pharmacists' errors accounted for the rest. Although none of the errors were fatal, a few were life threatening. The researchers recommend installing a bar code system in hospitals similar to the system in supermarkets that tracks products.

—Journal of the American Medical Association

▲ A recent court ruling may open the door for allowing researchers to have access to their peer-review files. The case involved an owner of a seismic technology firm who was turned down for a grant by a federal agency and sued for access to her reviewers' names and verbatim text of their comments. The U.S. District Court judge ruled in the owner's favor, but the agency may wind up appealing to a higher court.

—Science

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