

**"Cannibals" At The Gates Of Congress: A Call For  
Activism, Not Complacency  
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There was an audible sigh of relief in the life sciences community in early January when Congress approved-and President Clinton signed-authorization bill H.R. 1358. The bill set the fiscal year 1996 budget of the National Institutes of Health at \$11.9 billion, an increase of 5.7 percent. With the Republicans in Congress waging a holy war to balance the budget at any cost, many scientists feared that research budgets would be reduced, if not slashed. Apparently, NIH has dodged the bullet.

Other science funding agencies have not fared as well. Under an omnibus bill (H.R. 2405) passed last October that combined authorizations for seven federal funding agencies, the total appropriations for basic research increased by just 1.4 percent. The loser was the National Science Foundation, which took a cut of 0.8 percent, from \$2.245 billion in 1995 to \$2.226 billion in 1996. However, the bill is still pending in the Senate.

These modest increases are welcome news to the scientific community, in light of earlier threats by freshman members of Congress to slash science funding by 30 percent over the next seven years. But it would be a serious mistake for scientists to become-or remain-complacent about congressional research funding decisions.

The need for activism was best expressed by House Science Committee

Chairman Robert S. Walker (R-Pa.). In a House debate on July 12 about an energy and water appropriation bill (H.R. 1905), Walker caustically observed: "This has been a very discouraging day in the House. I have watched peer review science being just put aside by the House in almost a mindless cannibalism of basic research programs . . . and we are doing so in almost a gleeful way."

So the modest 1996 NIH research funding increases should not lull scientists into complacency but rather spur them to activism to educate and deal effectively with the "cannibals" of science programs in the federal government. Unfortunately, scientists cannot rely on the strong science advocacy of Walker. As reported in *The Scientist* (Notebook, Jan. 8, 1996, page 30), Walker announced in December that he will not run for office again when his term runs out later this year. Another strong advocate of science, Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.), has also declared his intention not to seek re-election.

There is little justification for a premature belief that the short-term increase in research funding will continue in 1997 and beyond. Rather, it is more likely that the cannibals at the gates may indeed try to slash funding significantly, especially in the absence of the determined and enlightened leadership of Walker, Hatfield, and other basic research supporters.

Another reason why the modest increase for 1996 does not warrant complacency is that states are experiencing serious fiscal problems of their own. As reported by Bruce V. Bigelow in *The Scientist* (Jan. 22, 1996, page 1), state support of the University of California system was slashed by \$433 million, representing about 20 percent of the state-financed portion of the university's 1989-90 budget. These cuts are hardly offset by the modest increase in federal research funding.

Yet another reason for concern is that the budget-cutting zealots in Congress are looking to carve up former sacred cows, such as Medicare and Medicaid. According to Purnell W. Choppin, president of the Chevy Chase, Md.-based Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), "Academic medical centers across the country are being squeezed by reductions in patient care revenues and restrictions on government research spending." In recognizing this crisis, HHMI awarded \$80 million in grants to 30 medical school clinical research programs (Notebook, *The Scientist*, Jan. 22, 1996, page 30). But this can be regarded only as a stopgap measure. At some point, Congress must establish clinical research funding line items within the total health care budget.

So what can scientists do? They should seriously engage in persistent, professional, and effective lobbying-just

as any other self-interest group does-through the establishment of a formal lobbying organization.

There are more than a million scientists and engineers employed in the United States. Whether in industry, academia, or government, they work federal support of basic research and development is their common cause. In Washington, there is strength-and influence-in numbers. Lobbyists representing a 1-million-strong voting constituency would find many open doors and sympathetic ears in Congress. Certain nonprofit professional societies are indeed pursuing this course of action. In a future commentary, their goals, progress, and organization will be updated.

Unless scientists learn to play by Washington's rules and speak with a forceful and unified voice, they have only themselves to blame for the potentially disastrous cancellation of research funding that may come in the next few years.

An effective way to start your own personal lobbying is by calling your congressional representatives and senators to express thanks for the NIH increases. But do also remind them that NSF, too, funds basic research that is crucial to advances in the life sciences.

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