House Appropriations Hearing: NCI Requests $61 Million Increase; Asks for $2.2 Billion

Rep. John Porter (R-Ill.) opened the National Cancer Institute’s FY 1998 appropriation hearing Feb. 26, by stating that he and his colleagues had agreed to forego the customary round of opening remarks to allow more time for discussion with the NCI Director, Richard Klausner, M.D. As a result, the early portion of the hearing was predominately a dialogue about screening mammography, with several members of the subcommittee expressing a desire for clarity in NCI’s recommendations.

Budget Request

NCI’s budget request for FY 1998 is $2.217 billion, an increase of $61 million over 1997. These numbers do not include NCI’s share of dollars supporting AIDS research; those funds will be appropriated to the National Institutes of Health Office of AIDS Research for distribution back to the institutes according to research priorities established by OAR.

Moving beyond the issue of mammography, Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.) asked about NCI research on other detection technologies. Klausner described some of the other promising technologies under development such as digital mammography, MRI, and PET. He informed the subcommittee that he is in the process of assembling a “think tank” of experts in imaging technology to develop a broad research agenda for imaging research.

Adequacy of Funds

Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), who was unable to attend an earlier subcommittee meeting with NIH Director Harold Varmus, M.D., had several questions for both Varmus and Klausner about research advances for minority populations, and expressed concern about the adequacy of funds provided to the NIH Office of Minority Health. Varmus described the role of OMH in coordinating research that is funded largely by the NIH research institutes. Therefore, Varmus said, the funding levels for OMH do not necessarily reflect increased efforts in minority health research at the institute level. Stokes has a particular interest in the continued high cancer mortality rate in African-American men. Klausner reported that NCI will convene a Progress Review Group to identify areas of need for this population in NCI’s research agenda.

Responding to a question posed by Rep. Dan Miller (R-Fla.) about how research on one disease may benefit other research, Varmus and Klausner both gave examples of how research on angiogenesis is advancing under-

—Judith Randal
A major concern in the San Francisco Bay Area is the apparent high rates of both breast and prostate cancer. Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) asked what NCI is doing to address these high rates. Klaussner described NCI’s research on geographic variations of cancer and also discussed the difficulty in identifying any single environmental exposure as the culprit.

Research Opportunities

A question from Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) about research opportunities led to a discussion about how NCI and other institutes identify promising areas of research and the funds required to carry out these programs. Klaussner described the NCI process that culminates with the development of the bypass budget, a vehicle that is not available to every NIH institute.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.), a survivor of ovarian cancer, asked about funding for ovarian cancer research, and specifically about NCI’s plans to fund a SPORE (Specialized Program of Research Excellence) in ovarian cancer. Klaussner responded that the SPORE program will be reviewed in the next 1 to 2 years and new SPORES will not be funded until after that review is completed and recommendations are available about the success of the program. He also described the Cancer Genome Anatomy Project and its promise for improving the detection of ovarian cancer by looking for pre-malignant changes in ovarian cells.

—Dorothy Tisevich

Awards, Appointments, Announcements

The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, honored Emil J. Freireich, M.D., by holding a symposium in his honor last month. He is director of the Adult Leukemia Research Program and professor of medicine there.

The symposium saluted his career-long contributions to clinical cancer research and commemorated his 70th birthday. Speakers included 27 former trainees and current or former colleagues.

M. D. Anderson’s announcement said that Freireich’s “observations about the role of blood component transfusions to manage severe complications of leukemia and his perseverance in testing combinations of anti-cancer drugs helped revolutionize treatment of acute leukemia and led to improved therapy for other cancers as well. He is widely known as a founding father of modern clinical cancer research.”

Coley Award Recipients

The Cancer Research Institute, New York, announced that it chose three researchers to receive its 1997 William B. Coley Award for Distinguished Research in Basic and Clinical Immunology.

Stuart F. Schlossman, M.D., of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, was chosen for his work “in identifying key molecules on the surface of lymphocytes and the impact it has had on our understanding of the pathogenesis and therapy of a variety of human diseases.”

Timothy R. Mosmann, Ph.D., University of Alberta, Canada, and Robert L. Coffman, M.D., DNAX Research Institute of Molecular and Cellular Biology, Palo Alto, Calif., were chosen for their work “in recognizing the existence of CD4 T-cell subsets and the importance these findings hold for comprehending a wide range of diseases.”

Hohn Heads RPCI

The Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Buffalo, named David C. Hohn, M.D., as president and chief executive officer. He had been vice president for patient care at the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, Houston.

At RPCI, Hohn’s immediate goals include initiation of a comprehensive review of clinical and research programs; development of a strategic marketing plan; and development of a 5-year fundraising initiative that will not only contribute to endowment, but also support long-term capitalization and research activities.