

Stimulus Package Provides Bonanza for NIH

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Dread of disease and hope for cures have long been the political propellants for generous support of the National Institutes of Health. The old trio has now been joined by a new force in biomedical politics: economic calamity.

NIH had previously offered no treatment for that malady. But now it has been conscripted as a recession-fighting job creator. Through skilled maneuvering in the Senate, the annual NIH budget — becalmed at just under \$30 billion for the past six years — has been boosted all at once by \$10.4 billion, to a grand total of \$40 billion. Research!America, which lobbies for NIH budget growth, estimates that the new money will finance some 70,000 jobs for research personnel and for workers in the renovation and construction of laboratory facilities. Adding a new hoop to the rigors of pursuing grant and contracts, NIH has announced that “applications with little or no effect on American jobs are not likely to be funded.” The instructions also express favor for “green” technologies “when possible.”

The added money, to be spent over two years, was included in the \$787 billion economic stimulus package signed into law on February 17 by President Obama. Congress later voted another \$938 million for NIH when it finally got around to the long-delayed adoption of a budget for the current fiscal year. Since candidate Obama endorsed a doubling of science support over 10 years, the budget future looks promising, but the chiefs of the research establishment are urging care and caution. Citing \$60 billion as the 10-year doubling goal for NIH, Richard B. Marchase, President of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, has warned that “We’re going to have to do an exceptionally good job to convince Congress,” according to a report in *The Hill*. The painfully stalled budgets that followed the doubling of NIH funding between 1998 and 2003 were apparently behind a caution from NIH Acting Director Raynard S. Kington, who warned that the stimulus money was a one-shot add-on to the NIH budget, and not an addition to “the base funding level.” *The New York Times* noted that Kington has acknowledged that, given the economic goals of the stimulus spending, “We will be sensitive to geographic distribution” — an admission of political reality rarely made by the upper levels of federal research management.

The impresario of the massive budget boost for NIH is Senator Arlen Specter, Republican from Pennsylvania. Specter, an industriously devoted supporter of NIH, is currently receiving chemotherapy for a recurrence of Hodgkin’s disease. He previously underwent open-heart surgery. Specter, age 79, is a vigorous champion of research and modern medicine. The House initially voted to provide NIH with a \$3.5 billion share of the overall stimulus budget. Not enough for Specter, who proposed \$10.4 billion. Rounding up two other Republican votes, he was needed by the Democrats to boost their narrow edge for passing Obama’s stimulus bill. With all other Republicans standing firm against the bill, Specter was indispensable for passage. He got the \$10.4 billion for NIH, and the House, with a large Democratic majority, adopted the Senate version.

The stimulus legislation designates large categories of spending for the NIH money, with roughly \$7.4

billion for NIH's institutes and centers, \$1.3 billion for extramural construction and renovation, \$800 million for the Office of the Director for collaborative projects within NIH, and \$500 million for improvements on the NIH campus. The bill also reserves at least \$200 million in fiscal years 2009-2010

for 10 programs under the heading of Challenge Grants in Health and Science Research, including "Behavior, Behavioral Change, and Prevention," for which nine separate "challenge topics" are listed. See http://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/challenge_award.

Though "shovel ready" is the battle cry of stimulus and recovery, NIH is moving at its customarily deliberative pace. The deadline for applying for construction money is September 17, 2009; peer review is scheduled for February 2010, council review (of peer-review) will take place in May 2010, and the "earliest anticipated" start date is July 2010.

Applying the stimulus money is not for the bureaucrat novices. According to the instructions for "Application Submission":

"The SF424 (R&R) Application Guide is critical to submitting a complete and accurate application to NIH. Some fields within the SF424 (R&R) applications components, although not marked as mandatory, are required by NIH (e.g., the "Credential" log-in field of the "Research & Related Senior/Key Person Profile" component must contain the PD/PI's assigned eRA Common User ID)...."