

Peer review needs more support from Congress

The penchant of Congress on occasion to bypass the peer-review process in allocating funds for research facilities is having an increasingly corrosive effect on the well-being of our national research effort. (Such funds came to over \$20 million in fiscal 1985; see September, page 57 and October, page 121.) Although political decisions of this kind by Congress are by no means a recent innovation, their impact at this time is heightened by the competitive funding situation research scientists face now and in the foreseeable future.

Clearly the peer-review system has proven itself to be the principal means of ensuring the most efficient and effective deployment of the nation's resources that the Administration and Congress agree to commit to research. This reality was underscored recently by a letter strongly supporting peer review addressed to Congressman Don Fuqua (chairman of the Committee on Science and Technology) and signed jointly by George Keyworth, science advisor to the President, and a high-ranking official from each of the three major funding agencies—NSF, DOD and DOE. The joint letter observed: "During the last year, many members of Congress, as well as eminent scientists, engineers, educators and industrialists, have reaffirmed the importance of such systematic expert review, and have eschewed disruption of this important but delicate national undertaking by narrowly based political considerations."

In a separate letter to Fuqua, Mildred S. Dresselhaus, president of The American Physical Society, pinpointed how Congress's "ill-considered actions" in bypassing peer review are damaging the research effort: Scarce resources are diverted from projects of higher priority; many projects deemed worthy by peer review are deferred or abandoned each year for lack of funds; the money allocated to unreviewed projects should be better used to rescue some of these deferred or abandoned programs.

Perhaps even more damaging is the effect on the morale of the research community. Dresselhaus notes "a growing cynicism among the many prominent scientists who devote much of their time to proposal review for the Federal government, without compensation, only to hear of

large awards to projects that circumvented the peer-review process." Certainly there is reason to be concerned about the morale of the scientists whose well-thought-of projects have been denied funding.

Finally, we need to be concerned about the continuing support of the scientists' institutions for the peer-review system. Dresselhaus observes that "institutions are increasingly persuaded that political maneuvering is more important than scientific justification in securing Federal funds."

At stake, then, is not just the funding lost to worthwhile programs. The continuing effectiveness of the peer-review system itself is being threatened in its role as impartial adjudicator of scientific merit in the distribution of *all* Federal funding for research.

Dresselhaus acknowledged that, in making funding decisions, Congress has the obligation to consider, in addition to peer review, geographical balance, economic need and affirmative action. Unfortunately, in his reply to Dresselhaus and to Keyworth and his colleagues, Fuqua did not explicitly concur with the position of the scientific community that all funding proposals should receive peer review regardless of how strongly political factors are expected to influence the final decision. Fuqua did, however, announce that his committee is conducting a two-year study of science policy in which "the role of expert review will be given full consideration." (See October, page 57.)

We urge all scientists to start now to educate their elected representatives in Washington about the importance of peer review to the national research effort. Our goal will be to persuade Congress to adopt our "no-exception" stand on peer review as its own.

Harold L. Davis