

Cancer unit: Gearing up for the battle

New director outlines plans
for bolstered scientific
program to fight cancer



ESS

Nixon-appointee Rauscher promises a spirited scientific attack against cancer.

The National Cancer Act, which keeps the National Cancer Institute within the National Institutes of Health, but with special funding and direct ties to the President, was signed into law last December after months of legislative contortions (SN: 10/9/71, p. 243). The contortions may have been undesirable as far as raising false hopes about the prospects for a quick cancer cure. However they do appear to have blown in some healthy changes—such as the refurbished cancer institute now under way.

The National Cancer Panel, to oversee the entire new NCI operation, has been appointed. It includes Benno C. Schmidt, a New York City financier, a personal friend of President Nixon and one of the initial movers for a souped-up cancer effort; R. Lee Clark, president of the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute, and Robert A. Good, a well-known immunologist from the University of Minnesota Medical School. While the panel apprises the President of the institute's activities, the National Cancer Advisory Board will advise the director of NCI. The board members have also been selected. The chairman is Philadelphia surgeon Jonathan Rhoads. Since October, 250 scientists from the outside scientific community have been pooling their ideas on what directions the new NCI should go (SN: 4/1/72, p. 216).

Last week President Nixon announced the expected appointment of Frank J. Rauscher Jr., as new director of the institute. Rauscher is a Ph.D. microbiologist and formerly head of NCI research on viruses and their role in cancer. He succeeds Carl G. Baker, who has been named special assistant to the director of the National Institutes of Health.

In a press conference at the White House and in an interview this week, Rauscher said the major new emphasis of NCI, mandated by the National Cancer Act, will be on early diagnosis and treatment of persons with cancer. Of the some 100 known kinds of cancer, 15 grow rapidly. When they are detected early and treated aggressively, "they are amenable not only to long-term remission, but in many cases to cure," Rauscher says. There are now only five early diagnosis and treatment centers in the United States, and all but one—the M. D. Anderson Hospital—are in the East. The NCI will be setting up similar centers in strategic areas of the country, with \$40 million construction money approved by Congress and signed by Nixon last week. That \$40 million is in addition to the \$337 million the NCI has already received for its projects and research for this fiscal year.

The NCI, Rauscher says, will also make unprecedented efforts to identify those persons who are particularly vulnerable to certain kinds of cancers—and to lessen their susceptibility. The types include lung cancer from asbestos or tobacco, cancer caused by industrial dyes, and cancer caused by drugs. Twenty two chemicals are known to be involved in producing cancer in man (over a hundred are known to be involved with cancer in animals).

Efforts to understand the origins of cancer will also move ahead, particularly endeavors to see how viruses and other carcinogens, such as chemicals and radiation, might interact in an animal host or in a human host. Might a virus that is latent genetic information in a host, be turned on by some environmental chemical or a drug? Researchers at the NCI, such as Robert Huebner, George Todaro and Joseph Hellman,

have growing evidence for this "oncogene theory." The NCI will try to prove or disprove the theory, as well as to grasp other possible interplays between viruses, chemicals and radiation in the development of cancer. No scientists at the institute have attempted such a correlation before.

Efforts to find cancer cures will also continue, Rauscher says, although past extensive and expensive NCI efforts to find effective drugs against cancer have not been very successful. Rauscher is particularly keen on moving NCI research toward the ultimate—cancer prevention. "I do not see any single breakthrough," he says, "but an accumulation of information which sooner or later will ripen—and in many cases this will be soon—for developing means for treatment as well as of prevention."

Scientists at the NCI as well as elsewhere have mostly good words for Rauscher and for the President's decision to make him head of NCI. Says Hellman, "I know Dick Rauscher well. I think his strongest forte is that he is an extremely good administrator and works well with others. Everyone I know respects him for that. He will work well with people from diversified research areas and make them feel like they are pulling together."

Hellman and some other NCI scientists anticipate that the directions the remodeled NCI will be taking will come not just from mandates under the National Cancer Act and from Rauscher's personal convictions about cancer research, but also from the views and contributions from the outside scientific community. The NCI's new board includes outside scientists, and chances are strong that the board will have large control over NCI grants and contracts to university cancer researchers. □