

Medical fund impoundments: More shock, more fury

In his budget message in January, the President announced drastic cuts in funds for health and medical research in fiscal 1974. He also announced that the Administration was not going to spend all the money that Congress had designated for health and medical research in fiscal 1973 (SN: 2/3/73, p. 69).

Since the President had switched Caspar W. Weinberger from director of the Office of Management and Budget to Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (SN: 1/13/73, p. 21), Congress anticipated that the withholdings of HEW funds for fiscal 1973 would be substantial. But now that fiscal 1973 is over, they are shocked and dismayed to learn that the Administration withheld more than a fifth of all the funds that Congress had designated.

The withholdings come to \$1.1 billion, out of a Congressional designation of \$4.8 billion. With the exception of Medicare and Medicaid, all of the nation's health and research programs are funded from this money. The withholdings have meant doing away with

entire programs in some cases.

Federal money for hospital construction was eliminated. Other programs that were drastically cut came under the Health Services and Mental Health Administration. Some \$199 million was lopped from its designated \$744 million budget. The National Heart and Lung Institute did not get \$44 million of its specified \$300 million budget. Even the President's publicized pet, the National Cancer Institute, had \$59 million axed from its designated \$492 million budget.

In a letter to Weinberger, Rep. Harley Staggers (D-W.Va.) wrote, "I am dismayed that you have felt it appropriate to impound the billion dollars. . . ." Staggers heads the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, of which the Public Health and Environment Subcommittee is a part. Rep. Paul Rogers (D-Fla.), chairman of the subcommittee, accuses the Administration of not carrying out the laws passed by Congress and thus distorting the constitutional premise of the separation of powers.

The Administration is defending its

position on the grounds that an appropriations bill for fiscal 1973 was vetoed and money for fiscal 1973 was made available under a continuing resolution. The Administration interpreted the funds Congress had designated under the resolution as a ceiling, not as a baseline. Says a spokesman for the Public Health and Environment Subcommittee, "In the legal sense, these were not impounded moneys. But in the colloquial sense, they were." Adds a spokesman for Paul Rogers, "There is no longer any doubt in anybody's mind that the \$1.1 billion is an impoundment."

Impoundment or not, Rogers calls it a "very serious situation." He says it might be necessary to hold hearings on the subject and even to call for the resignations of officials who were involved. Declares Rep. William Roy (D-Kan.), a physician, "It's illegal . . . that is where the fight is. Regardless of how you look at it, we spent a billion dollars less on health service programs, which included manpower, family planning, child and maternal health, in fiscal 1973 than we did in fiscal 1972." States Rep. Tim Lee Carter (R-Ky.), also a physician, "Overall I am against the impoundment of health funds. . . . On basic research, applied research, we cannot afford to cut back."

To counter the Administration's withholding of fiscal 1973 funds, Congress is threatening Supreme Court action. Asked whether he thought Congress would go that far, Carter replied, "Yes ma'am, I certainly do." In fact, says Roy, a District Court ruling in the District of Columbia has already favored Congress' position on 1973 funds. The case was brought by community mental health centers. The ruling requires that money designated for them in fiscal 1973 has to be expended. However the ruling is now before the Court of Appeals. If this court does not overturn the ruling, Roy anticipates that it will be expanded to the national level.

Whether the Supreme Court will favor Congress nationally only time will tell. Presidents have been impounding Congressional appropriations since

Unraveling the chemistry of interferon

In 1957, protein made by human white blood cells was found to be a natural defense against viruses. Scientists hoped that interferon might be used to treat flu and cold infections. But efforts to develop a treatment did not work out, largely because natural human interferon was difficult and costly to obtain. During the past several years, however, techniques for harvesting human interferon have improved, and interferon again looks promising as a cold and flu treatment (SN: 3/31/73, p. 208).

Still, until human interferon can be synthesized and mass-produced in the laboratory, it will not become available to the general public as a flu and cold treatment. And synthesis depends on understanding its chemistry.

No human or animal interferon preparation has reached a state of purity that permits direct chemical analysis, but Austrian researchers have now used enzyme and chemical treatments to partially unravel the chemistry of rabbit interferon. They have found that it is a sugar protein with at least one terminal sequence of sialic acid, which in turn degrades into galactose. Presumably human interferon is similar. They report their findings in the July PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES.

The reason so much natural human interferon is needed to obtain therapeutic benefits may be due, at least partly, to the quick breakdown of interferon in the body. The Austrian chemists believe their findings may help them to eventually retard this rapid breakdown.