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national news

Reauthorization of Ryan White Fund due in March

AIDS and sexual minority rights activists gave polite applause to President Clinton's proposed increase of 5.1 percent in AIDS funding for fiscal year 1996. It was a warmer reception than the community had given him a year earlier when he proposed a slightly greater percentage increase in total spending.

The reaction was an attempt at "positive reinforcement" according to one lobbyist who wishes to remain anonymous. "He [Clinton] does so little positive that we felt like we should encourage this."

Reauthorization of the Ryan White Care Act, the principle vehicle for federal dollars for treatment and care, must come before any new funding. The Senate will lead on this one. Most lobbyists believe it to be the more sympathetic of the two chambers.

Nancy Kassebaum (R-Kan.) now chairs the key Education and Labor committee, last year headed up by Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.). She "has committed herself to reauthorizing the Act," said Cornelius Baker, public policy director for the National Association of People with AIDS. And she is moving quickly toward implementation.

A briefing by AIDS lobbyists Feb. 9 drew representatives from about 40 Senate offices. Hearings on Ryan White were held Feb. 22. Kassebaum plans to mark up a bill in March and send it to the House for consideration.

"But there is no guarantee that we will be able to get it through the House in a timely manner," Baker said.

AIDS czar Patsy Fleming and Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala continue to argue that AIDS is not a partisan issue and foresee no big battle in Congress over funding. That perspective is reflected by AIDS lobbyists and by Rich Tafel, executive director of the partisan national organization Log Cabin Republicans.

Data in new field of protease inhibitors mixed

Protease inhibitors are the best hope in a next generation of anti-retroviral therapies according to many AIDS activists and clinicians. Data presented at the second National Conference on Human Retroviruses and Related Infections was interpreted both optimistically and less so by numerous speakers.

Medical researchers were there, so too the major pharmaceutical companies which provide the product and funding for many of the trials. As always, there were times when it was difficult to figure out where the science ended, the interpretation began, and the marketing spin took over.

It is especially difficult with protease, where many of the participants are relatively healthy, often asymptomatic, some with initial CD4 counts as high as 500 and boosted higher by the drug. Surrogate markers, such as CD4 count and PCR measurement of viral loads, are used to evaluate the drug instead of clinical endpoints such as opportunistic infections. Often only a handful of participants have been in a protocol, and then for generally less than a year. Larger trials are in progress but results are incomplete.

The protease family appears to be safe, lacking significant toxicity or side effects to patients.

Martin Markowitz, a researcher with the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center in New York City, pointed to clinical work and called protease "10 to 20 times more powerful, individually, compared to AZT alone" in killing the HIV virus.

He has worked primarily with ABT-538, in development by Abbott Laboratories, and has seen viral load reductions of up to 1.5 log. However, he urged use of protease in combination with nucleoside analogs such as AZT because of rapid mutation by the virus.

But Jean-Pierre Sommadossi, working at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, reported a significant problem with that same drug. He saw a binding to human serum glycoprotein (AAG) which "profoundly affected antiviral activity by decreasing cellular uptake" by 85 percent. The drug simply didn't get into the cell where it needs to work.

Activist Martin Delaney, executive director of Project Inform in San Francisco, acknowledged that the Food and Drug Administration licenses medications if they have a "clinical benefit." He stated the feeling of a group of treatment activists and challenged that policy when he said, "But now we're not sure if that is the right basis."

What all participants could agree upon is that data is still very slim in this new field of protease inhibitors. Ongoing and planned trials should fill in some of the blanks and likely raise even more questions.

Pentagon snit on AIDS spending

The Pentagon tried to slash current research spending on AIDS (\$30 million) and breast cancer (\$150 million) as economy moves not central to their "mission" of battlefield medicine. The programs have never been popular with the military brass but have had strong support on Capitol Hill.

The work has been funneled through the affiliated Henry M. Jackson Foundation which coordinates and funds much of the medical research within the armed services.



Researchers had already stopped accepting new patients into programs and were told to expect layoffs, according to a story in the Feb. 10 edition of *The Washington Post*.

That news brought a strong rebuke from White House Chief of Staff Leon E. Panetta. He fired off a letter to Defense Secretary William J. Perry saying: "The president believes that research to combat these deadly diseases is vitally important to all Americans, and it is of special significance to him."

Still, the \$9.6 million the president requested in his budget for AIDS research within the military is less than the Pentagon asked for last year, and it is less than it has received in every year since 1988.

Sandy Nelson gets day in court

Tacoma journalist Sandy Nelson, who was disciplined by her employer, *The News Tribune*, for her off-duty political activism for gay and lesbian civil rights, has won the right to a trial.

A trial date was set for September 1996 by Pierce County Superior Court Judge Vicki Hogan. In an earlier hearing Nelson moved for immediate reinstatement without a trial. The newspaper moved to have three of Nelson's six claims dismissed. Nelson's claim that her forced transfer violated the state constitution was dismissed. Hogan stated that a trial is needed to determine if the newspaper violated a state law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of an employee's political activities.

Nelson is represented by attorneys from the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington.

Reported by Bob Roehr