Community Page

Research Advocacy: Why Every Scientist Should Participate

Elizabeth Marincola

In the United States, a generation and more has passed since widespread sustained political involvement by students in the affairs of the nation, such as the movement to oppose the war in Vietnam. Today's students and post-doctoral fellows have no first-hand memory of broad, organized efforts to convince the government that represents them to shift its priorities significantly. This has presented a special challenge to ensuring the continued vigor of the biomedical research enterprise. Why should scientists invest precious time to advocate for biomedical research?

Today, political involvement by scientists is widely acknowledged to be vital for the continued health of the biomedical research enterprise. Science

must inform important national policy issues such as genetically modified foods, animal research, the teaching of evolution, and stem cell research. Experience has shown that when public debate is not grounded in fact, pseudo-science fills the vacuum. Also, while federal support for basic biomedical research is per se uncontroversial and enjoys broad bipartisan support, in a difficult economy, when tradeoffs must be made in discretionary spending, there is an urgency to explain and promote the importance of basic research and its contributions to human health. Members of Congress are elected, at least theoretically, for their judgment, their experience, and their principles. No one individual, no matter how competent, can be deeply informed about every sector of the economy over which she has control as legislator and appropriator. Thus, members of Congress rely on those with special expertise to educate them.

To be sure, there are professionals in Washington whose full-time concern is advocating for biomedical research. Why shouldn't the work of educating Congress be left in the hands of these advocates? First, because notwithstanding their passion and the merit of the interest they represent, professional advocates

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Abbreviations: CLC, Congressional Liaison Committee; JSC, The Joint Steering Committee for Public Policy; NIH, National Institutes of Health

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can be perceived, by members of Congress without sophisticated appreciation of biomedical research, as just another lobbyist, little different than one from the National Wooden Pallet & Container Association or the Snack Food Association. Second, only researchers themselves can credibly convey the full excitement, promise, and potential of scientific research from their own experience. Third, scientists who talk to their representative or senator have particular influence when they are themselves constituents or when they come from institutions that are important employers in the representative's district. Fourth, there is power in numbers: the voices for biomedical science must be a steady stream in the ear of Congress. Fifth, establishing communication between representatives or their health staffs and the scientist-constituent provides a point of contact should an issue emerge that requires the representative to seek advice about a biomedical research matter.

Advocacy battles must be fought on multiple fronts. The fundamental issue that never goes away is funding. Congress has been supportive of biomedical research in the last several years: over the course of two administrations and congressional majorities of both parties, leaders have come together to double the budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) over five years, concluding in

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2003. Similarly, the National Science Foundation is enjoying special support at the current time. But, as any scientist who visits Capitol Hill can testify, the number of dollars appropriated for biomedical research is just one of several issues of concern to members of Congress, to patients and their advocates, and to researchers alike.

Scientists, like other citizens, recognize that there are multiple

legitimate priorities for federal support. Inevitable conflicts among spending priorities can leave a scientist ambivalent about advocacy for increased funding for biomedical research, potentially at the cost of other worthy programs. But other worthy programs are promoted by those who are expert in them, as scientists are experts in research. The jobs of those experts are to advocate for education, law enforcement, housing, etc., as scientists advocate for research. In Washington, federally supported programs that are not constantly promoted will lose support to those that are.

The more complicated, more political, and more polarizing issues that we grapple with include embryonic stem cell research, somatic cell nuclear transfer, even the teaching of natural selection in public schools. Those who are opposed to these activities are well organized and well financed. They reach elected representatives and voters at every level, from the White House to the local school board. Scientists have a moral obligation to respond to and preempt ideological demands and to ensure that federal policy decisions are based on sound fact and science.

A coalition of scientific societies was organized by the American Society for Cell Biology in 1989 under the name of The Joint Steering Committee for Public Policy (JSC). It was founded by scientists who saw the need to become involved in the political process. The scientific community is fortunate that JSC leadership includes many of the country's most respected scientists. Among its activities, the JSC helped Congress launch the Congressional Biomedical Research Caucus, which has since grown to become perhaps the most credible caucus in Congress. A caucus serves a convening, organizing, and advocacy function for members of Congress who support its purpose: a sort of bipartisan, no-dues association for congressional representatives. Like the Congressional Black Caucus or the Congressional Women's Caucus, the Congressional Biomedical Research Caucus is most centrally concerned with federal funding. Among its activities is a highly successful series of briefings that brings research leaders to Capitol Hill to describe the latest advances in biomedical research. Nearly 125 such briefings have

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Bringing Science to Capitol Hill

American Society for Cell Biology council in Washington, D.C. (Photo republished with permission from the *ASCB Newsletter*.)

been hosted by the caucus since the founding of the JSC.

The JSC also founded the Congressional Liaison Committee (CLC) to enable every biomedical scientist to engage in the political process. Any scientist who cares about the future of basic research is encouraged to participate in the activities of the CLC. Multiple levels of involvement are available, from signing a pre-drafted letter to a member of Congress to traveling to Washington, D.C., to spend a day meeting with congresspersons and their staffs. Advocacy can be just as effective at home: when in recess in their district, House representatives often welcome an invitation to visit a lab or an assembly of scientists. Scientists at any point in their education and career are welcome—a representative often favors a post-doc from her own district to a world-renowned scientist from someone else's. CLC staff thoroughly brief participants on issues and protocol for participating in the political process and accompany the delegation of scientists on its visits.

The JSC and the scientific societies it represents face formidable immediate challenges. Chief among them is to ensure a level of NIH funding into the future that maximizes the potential to capitalize on past federal investment in research. Scientists also share responsibility to support continued

wise management and priority-setting by NIH leadership: NIH director Elias Zerhouni recently released a plan to support new collaborations and ensure that human benefits are derived from scientific discovery—the result of extended consultation with the scientific community.

The culture and progress of science require contributions by every individual beyond the success of her own experiments: reviewing papers, serving on study sections,

recommending accomplished colleagues for awards or promotion, serving as a mentor to students and junior scientists. To that we must add communicating with our members of Congress about the importance of basic biomedical research. It is easy to be complacent when one's research is funded and one's career is progressing—but such complacency is no more advisable than closing down the local fire station because your own house is not burning. As those

of us who remember an earlier era of political involvement know, if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. ■

Further Information

Congressional Liaison Committee: <http://www.jscpp.org/clc.htm>
The Joint Steering Committee for Public Policy: <http://www.jscpp.org>
The Joint Steering Committee for Public Policy membership: <http://www.jscpp.org/about.html#mem>
National Institutes of Health Roadmap: <http://nihroadmap.nih.gov>

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