

And the Parrot Said...

It's hard to tell a joke when everyone knows the punch line. It's even harder when the joke turns out not to be funny. By the time you read this story, we all may know what the FY12 budget is for the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH).

In September, the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee approved a Departments of Labor, Health & Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill (L-HHS) that included a 0.6% cut for NIH. The following week, the U.S. House of Representatives Appropriations Committee released an unofficial draft L-HHS bill that increased the NIH budget by 3.3%, the same amount President Obama requested in his FY12 budget request.

In order to provide the NIH with a 3.3% increase, however, the draft House bill reduces funding for a number of other programs within the same bill, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, the

Department of Education, and the National Labor Relations Board. All funding for President Obama's Affordable Care Act is also eliminated.

As of press time, it was uncertain what would happen next. It was unclear if the House NIH budget increase or the Senate NIH budget decrease would prevail. It was also unclear what impact the deliberations of the Joint Deficit Reduction Committee, established as part of the federal debt limit increase deal and often referred to as the Super Committee, would have on future federal spending.

Washington, DC, was abuzz with speculation and rumors about whether the Super Committee would be able to agree on at least \$1.2 trillion in savings in the federal budget. Congress might not complete action on the FY12 federal budget until after the Super Committee releases its recommendations on November 23, 2011, or even after Congress approves or disapproves of the plan in late December. ■

—Kevin M. Wilson

ASCB Proposes External Review

Good ideas take time to develop. For the last year, the ASCB has been trying to convince Francis Collins, Director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), that periodic, outside reviews of NIH operations is a good idea.

After first discussing the idea with Collins at the 2009 ASCB Annual Meeting, the ASCB followed up by letter. The ASCB said, "Responsible independent external review would reassure the Congress and the public about the agency's direction." The ASCB continued, "Periodic reviews would also focus public attention on the gains that are being made in publicly funded biomedical research and provide you and future NIH Directors with concrete examples of gains being made thanks to NIH-supported research. Such reviews would also allow you to recommend appropriate reforms and or large-scale budgetary changes that may be necessary to respond to ever-changing fiscal realities."

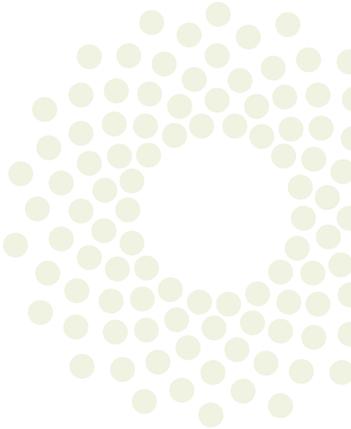
Unfortunately, Collins was not as enthusiastic as the ASCB had hoped. Collins replied that he would give our suggestion serious consideration.

At the same time he highlighted previous reviews of NIH operations, some as old as 19 years old, by outside groups. The most recent reviews cited by Collins were issued in 2003 and 2004, just as the five-year doubling of the NIH budget was concluding.

After reviewing the previous studies, the ASCB replied to Collins: "Perhaps a review of NIH as we approach the 10-year anniversary of the 2003 report, looking at implementation of those recommendations, would be helpful."

With Congress and the public focusing on how the federal government spends tax dollars, it is important for the NIH to show that it is a good steward of the funds it already receives. ■

—Kevin M. Wilson



With Congress and the public focusing on how the federal government spends tax dollars, it is important for the NIH to show that it is a good steward of the funds it already receives.