

AIDS

More for research and treatment

Washington

MOUNTING concern over the epidemic of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) has prompted Congress to add large sums to the administration's proposed budget for combatting the disease in fiscal year 1986, which started on 1 October. The House of Representatives has already passed an appropriation bill that would allocate \$189.7 million for research, prevention and treatment, \$70 million more than the administration's request and double what was spent last year, and the Senate appropriations committee last week voted to allocate a total of \$219 million to the disease.

Much of the extra money for AIDS would go to the National Institutes of Health (NIH); the House has earmarked all of its \$70 million increase for NIH, whereas the Senate committee spread its bounty between NIH (\$128 million), the Center for Disease Control (\$62.9 million) and the Alcohol, Drugs and Mental Health Administration (\$12.7 million). The \$16 million remainder in the Senate's allocation was voted to support a special fund to be administered by the Secretary of Health and Human Services for demonstrating AIDS treatments. The Senate bill has yet to pass the floor, but is not expected to be challenged on its provision for AIDS and the small differences with the House will then be settled.

The total appropriation for NIH in fiscal year 1986 is likely to come out at about

\$5,460 million, \$810 million more than the President's request and \$1,000 million more than the budget for the current fiscal year. This assumes no major attempt to make cuts on the Senate floor. The number of extramural research grants agreed by the Senate committee for 1986 — recently a bone of contention with the administration — is 6,000 the same as the number of multi-year competitive grants this year.

Tim Beardsley

• A US Public Health Service (PHS) plan for prevention and treatment of AIDS published recently is markedly more pessimistic in its assessment of prospects for a vaccine or therapy than was ex-Secretary of Health Margaret Heckler last year. In contrast to Heckler's prediction that a vaccine would be available within two or three years, the PHS plan concedes that "it is unlikely that a vaccine to substantially limit transmission will be generally available before 1990".

The plan sets goals of reducing the increase in transmission of AIDS virus by 1987; of reducing the increase in disease incidence by 1990; and of eliminating transmission of the virus by the year 2000. Edward Brandt Jr, the former assistant Secretary of Health who organized the PHS executive task force on AIDS, defended the goals as realistic but admitted to some doubts over whether the goal for the year 2000 would be totally achievable. Nevertheless, he said, progress indicates that "we're on the right track". □

New US policy on data security

Washington

THE White House has announced an administration-wide policy of relying exclusively on national security classification as a means of controlling access to fundamental research data. Universities and laboratories have been waiting anxiously since the proposal was first announced in May 1984 by Edith Martin, then Deputy Under-Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering.

The Department of Defense (DoD) already has in place a policy of placing no restrictions other than security classification on fundamental research data; nevertheless, the 16-month delay in making the policy general is widely attributed to opposition within certain factions of DoD — notably the international security policy division — to any loosening of DoD's powers to restrict the flow of research data to the Soviet bloc. The new policy takes the form of National Security Decision Directive 189. It declares that "to the maximum extent possible" the products of fundamental research are to remain unrestricted; where controls are necessary, classification is to be the applicable technique,

with each government agency responsible for determining whether to classify its research projects before making awards and to review periodically the status of all their research grants.

As most universities do not allow classified research on campus, the new policy should ensure that secrecy controls are not applied retrospectively to campus research.

Nevertheless, the victory for the universities may be largely symbolic, since few agencies other than DoD support much unclassified fundamental research that might have been restricted: administrators at the Department of Energy, for example, are said to be wondering what they should do in response to the directive.

Robert Rosenzweig, president of the Association of American Universities, cautions that the directive does not address one of the universities' current major concerns: DoD's policy of applying export controls to sensitive but unclassified data arising from research that is not considered to be fundamental. On this topic there is "still a dialogue", according to Rosenzweig.

Tim Beardsley

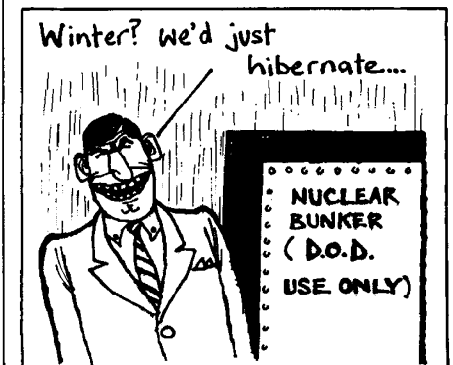
Nuclear winter

US arms control policy doubts

Washington

THE US Senate Armed Services Committee heard for itself last week the evidence for the global climate effects of a nuclear war and considered policy changes that could arise as a result of this knowledge. Although the committee found the evidence convincing, it remained in doubt that any changes in current official arms control policy are needed.

Richard Perle of the Department of Defense (DoD) said that the administration is "indebted" to scientists for their research but their suggestions of action based on the fear of a "nuclear winter" are inappropriate. In a sometimes heated exchange with Carl Sagan of Cornell Uni-



versity, Perle admitted that the idea of a nuclear winter has caused "a lot of concern", but only provides support for the administration's existing policy of bilateral strategic arms reduction combined with increased defensive programmes (the Strategic Defense Initiative) and improved "verification technologies" to allow accurate estimation of global nuclear forces.

Sagan argued that the number of US strategic nuclear weapons has, in fact, been increasing each year since the mid-1960s, stressing to senators that as few as 100 nuclear explosions would have severe climatic consequences. Senator Barry Goldwater (Republican, Arizona), chairman of the committee, pointed out that should a nuclear winter scenario be realistic, the greater accuracy of US weapons (current DoD thinking favours smaller and more accurate missiles) becomes an irrelevant issue.

Perle admitted the need for DoD to spend money to assess more accurately a lower limit for the number and magnitude of nuclear explosions that would affect the climate. But he saw no need for research on the biological effects of nuclear war at a time when the physical effects are so uncertain. And Sagan's conclusions that "drastic" reductions in nuclear arsenals are called for drew little response from the committee.

Maxine Clarke