

BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH

Bristol-Myers Ends No-Strings Grants

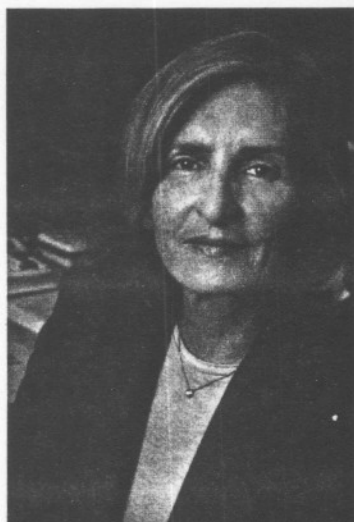
Scientists are mourning the cancellation of a long-running research grants program funded by a major drug company. The Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS) Freedom to Discover program, begun in 1977, only supports about 50 biomedical scientists at a time. But the grants, about \$6 million a year recently, come with no strings attached. That feature, which allows for high-risk research, is particularly welcome at a time when U.S. funding for biomedical research is tightening. Some scientists are troubled that the company is pulling the plug in part because of the growing global debate over the ethics of corporate payments to academic physicians. "I think they've gone overboard and are tanking a wonderful program," says grantee Carl June, a cancer researcher at the University of Pennsylvania.

BMS says that Freedom to Discover is the largest corporate-funded, unrestricted research grants program in the world. Scientists can't just bid for the grants, however. Instead, BMS scientists identify potential recipients doing work of interest to the company in six biomedical fields and invite them to compete. The winners, chosen largely based on their track records, receive \$100,000 a year for 5 years. The grantees also meet annually to choose a distinguished scientist to

receive a \$50,000 lifetime achievement award considered to be among the most prestigious in their fields.

The resulting flexibility to follow one's hunches is extremely rare, says Johns Hopkins University neuroscientist Michela Gallagher. She says her search for neurobiological markers that explain why some rats remain mentally sharp into old age might be seen as a "fishing expedition" by a U.S. National Institutes of Health study section. Others have used the company's money to support postdocs until they get their first grant or to collect chimp fecal samples in Africa for an HIV study. BMS makes no claim to any of the findings. "There's lots of payola within the pharmaceutical industry, but this is one of the few programs that is really squeaky clean," says immunologist W. Allan Walker of Harvard Medical School in Boston, who is also a recipient.

Earlier this year, the company began telling grantees, many of whom are not physicians, that



Fishing license. Michela Gallagher says a BMS grant lets her explore promising ideas.

it was changing some rules to avoid the perception of any conflict of interest. Spouses could no longer attend the awards selection meeting for free, for example, and grantees were asked to sign an agreement saying they were consultants to BMS.

BMS spokesperson Rebecca Taylor says the program was killed in order to expand efforts such as a \$150 million, multi-year program that funds pediatric AIDS clinics in Africa. But "an increase in compliance regulations affect-

ing the global pharmaceutical industry" is a contributing factor, she adds. Some recipients say they were told that BMS lawyers felt the company could run afoul of new, restrictive regulations in Europe on corporate gifts to physicians.

—JOCELYN KAISER

ACADEMIC POLITICS

Over Protests, U.K. Union Endorses Boycott of Israeli Academics

Rejecting the advice of its own executive officer, Britain's largest university union endorsed a motion this week calling on its members "to consider the appropriateness of a boycott" of individuals and institutions "that do not publicly dissociate themselves" from Israel's policies toward Palestinians. Scientific leaders around the world strongly condemned the union's action.

The resolution, which denounces Israel's "apartheid policies, including construction of the exclusion wall," may not carry much formal weight: The 67,000-strong National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), which approved it at its annual meeting on 29 May, was scheduled to go out of business on 1 June after merging into a new organization, the University and College Lecturers' Union. The boycott resolution will only be "advi-

sory" to the new organization, according to a spokesperson. But critics are concerned that it may encourage a "gray boycott." Warns Jonathan Rynhold of Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel, which was targeted by an earlier boycott attempt, academics could be judged not on merit but "according to their nationality and political opinions."

Even before it passed, the proposal drew heavy criticism from within the union and outside. NATFHE General Secretary Paul Mackney, although a supporter of the Palestinian cause, urged members not to endorse the boycott because it had not been vetted within the union, a NATFHE spokesperson says. Several thousand U.S. and Israeli academics made public their objections in May, as did several Nobel Prize winners, including physicist Steven Weinberg of the University of Texas, Austin. The board of AAAS (publisher of

Science) last week called the NATFHE proposal "antithetical to the role of free scientific inquiry" and asked that it be withdrawn.

After the vote, astronomer Martin Rees, president of the U.K.'s Royal Society, issued a statement deploring the action, saying that "NATFHE members ... should remember that boycotts of scientists at Israeli universities grossly violate the principles set out by the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies." Those guidelines rule out attempts to block the free expression of ideas and opinions. Scientific leaders drafted the policy 4 years ago in response to an earlier boycott petition—a move that failed. Last year, the U.K. Association of University Teachers, a smaller union, endorsed a boycott but rescinded it when faced with legal objections.

—ELIOT MARSHALL