AIDS Research Gets Huge Stimulus

February 25, 2009 By Peter Staley

Tucked away in the massive stimulus package signed by President Obama last week is the largest budget increase in the NIH's history. Thanks to Senator Arlen Specter, the budget of the National Institutes of Health will go from $29 billion to $39 billion -- a whopping 34 percent increase (see this NYT story for details).

I called Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and the top federal official responsible for AIDS research, and asked him how much of this increase would go to AIDS. Short answer, we don't know the exact amount at this point, but it should get approximately the same boost as all the other research areas. The current AIDS research budget is $2.9 billion. That could go up by another $1 billion, give or take a couple hundred grand. That's some serious stimulus.

Here's how it will work. The NIH will get an additional $10 billion, which it has to spend within two years. About a quarter of this amount is to be spent on classic infrastructure projects, like new buildings and laboratories at the NIH and university campuses. $7.4 billion will go directly to research, paying for as many as 15,000 additional grants submitted by scientists at universities across the country.

Each NIH institute will get a share of this $7.4 billion equal to their current allocation of the NIH grants budget. Then it will be up to each institute how to allocate their share. Fauci and the other institute directors will need to scour their current grant programs to find projects that can be funded quickly (within the next two years). They'll do a combination of new grants and increasing the size of some current grants. For new grants, they'll first look at recently submitted grant requests that were scored as worthy of support, but fell just below the previous budget cut-off lines.

So as each institute director looks at their current and potential grants portfolio for AIDS (there is no AIDS institute, but NIAID does more AIDS research than all the others), they'll be looking for what they can fund quickly, or within two years. If their AIDS portfolios offer lots of quick funding options, we'll get our fair share of the new stimulus money.

Fauci was hopeful that AIDS research would get the approximately one-third increase that other disease groups are hoping for. That would mean about $1 billion more over the next two years. That's huge. Combine this with some new found energy among activists and researchers to actually figure out a "functional cure" for AIDS, and we could be entering a golden age of AIDS

research.



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