

Save

## NIH and the Real World

Post  
Fri. Dec 27  
1974

**F**OR THE SECOND TIME in two years, the "political" leaders of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare "downtown" have fired the supposedly "non-political" director of the National Institutes of Health "uptown" in Bethesda. After only 18 months at NIH, Dr. Robert S. Stone, formerly of the University of New Mexico, has been asked to look for another job, reportedly because like his predecessor, Dr. Robert Q. Marston, he resisted drastic cuts in medical research. "The scientific community has got to get its head out of the clouds and begin to live in the real world where funds of all kinds are limited," said Dr. Charles G. Edwards, the assistant secretary of HEW who did the firing (and who has since resigned himself to join a medical supply manufacturing company). But the scientists at NIH say that is not quite the issue.

The issue that seems to keep NIH in a state of demoralized turmoil is not that scientists are unable to accept less research money, but that they are unwilling to accept more "unwarranted and counterproductive political control," as six of them, including four Nobel prize winners, put it the other day. They don't question that the nation's health services must be improved, that there are too few family doctors and too many super-specialists and that a well-functioning national health insurance plan still needs a lot of thought and fact-finding.

But scientists do question almost unanimously that creative medical research in a given field can be produced by "good management" like so many rolls of band-aids, as the political appointees in HEW's "downtown"

offices seem to believe. The scientists feel that exclusively "mission-oriented research" can be as wasteful as some uncomprehending administrators consider "basic research" to be.

The trouble at NIH, as Washington Post staff writer Stuart Auerbach reported last Thursday, is that vital research projects are stifled because too much money is spent on politically popular priorities set by the White House budget men, HEW officials and Congress.

Most scientists agree that they cannot live in splendid isolation from the rest of the nation, its needs and its political and economic problems. But they do consider themselves qualified to participate in the decisions about the specific areas, methods and priorities of investigation their science ought to pursue in order to obtain the most promising results. They also feel that scientists, perhaps through the National Academy of Science, should have a voice in nominating the director of NIH, who is appointed by the President. He should be, they say, a respected scientist who understands the problems and working methods of the National Institutes and is able to represent them "downtown" and before Congress.

We find this position entirely reasonable and constructive and we deplore the continuing turmoil within the nation's foremost medical research institution. We hope that President Ford will replace Dr. Stone and Dr. Edwards with persons able to restore morale and re-establish confidence between the "uptown" scientists and the "downtown" administrators.