Family planning: U.S. policy changing?

Several events in recent weeks suggest that the United States may be revising its policy on family planning assistance to developing countries. Most notable are two potentially far-reaching "anti-abortion" amendments that got tacked onto the House foreign aid bill. Their provisions, if enacted, could wipe out U.S. funding for the two largest family planning assistance organizations in the world — the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), based in London, England. In recent years, the United States has provided roughly one-third of each group's financial backing.

Because the foreign aid bill that passed the Senate contains similar provisions, there is a strong possibility that these policy changes will survive intact through the compromise pacts drafted when lawmakers from both houses of Congress meet to iron out a foreign aid package acceptable to both bodies. Work on that compromise bill was due to begin July 25.

Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-N.J.), leader of the House Pro-Life Caucus, authored the amendments. One of the amendments, prompted by reports of forced abortions, coerced sterilizations and infanticide in mainland China, was necessary to ensure that the existing U.S. policy of *voluntary* family planning support not be subverted, Smith told members of the House. The amendment prohibits use of any U.S. funds "to carry out population planning programs in the People's Republic of China, including through contributions to any international organization or any private and voluntary organization."

Moreover, the amendment would make the President responsible for determining annually whether any of the objectionable practices continued to occur as a direct or indirect result of China's population planning programs. If such a finding were made, the President would not only have to raise with Chinese officials the U.S. "humanitarian concern" over these practices, but would also have to consider imposing further sanctions against China until the practices ceased.

Finally, to put some teeth into its prohibition against using U.S. population assistance funds in China, the amendment would authorize the President to reduce — to zero, if he chose — those funds that the bill had earmarked for the UNFPA. The agency is slated to get roughly $51 million in U.S. funds this coming year.

Smith explained to the House that this threat of a drastic funding cut was needed to pressure UNFPA — as "co-managers of the coercive program in China" — into making China adopt a more voluntary population control strategy. UNFPA spends roughly $10 million of its annual $150 million budget on programs in China.

This last proposal brought forth strong objections and rhetoric from other House members during floor debate of the issue. For example, Rep. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) criticized the suggestion that all of UNFPA's work in 114 other countries be jeopardized just to make a point to China. Roughly one-third of the agency's budget now goes for programs on maternal and child health, many of them in Africa.

What's more, she noted, "The Agency for International Development [AID] conducted a study recently and confirmed that UNFPA has nothing to do with the activities in China [to which Smith was objecting]. The presence of UNFPA in China has probably served to blunt them [the activities]," she said.

Snowe charged that Smith's attack on China seems to be part of "a trend and commitment to undermine all U.S. support for international family planning programs under the guise of opposition to abortion and coercive elements in China that we condemn."

But that Smith amendment passed the House, as did another prohibiting U.S. funds from going to any nongovernmental organization that "performs or actively promotes abortion" in foreign nations. Last December, the Reagan administration withdrew support from IPPF — a group then receiving $17 million from the United States for its work in 118 countries — because of the group's pro-abortion stance. The House bill would have overturned that measure—and policy—but for the second Smith amendment.

Ironically, Rep. Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.) noted in her opposition to it, this amendment puts greater restrictions on the U.S. international family planning program than now exist on its domestic family planning counterpart.

In an unrelated measure, the Reagan administration selectively removed a long-standing requirement that AID-supported groups offering family planning counseling or services in developing countries tell their clients about all methods of family planning and offer referrals to organizations offering any of those services they cannot provide. From now on, centers offering information on "natural" family planning — based on periods of "abstinence" — need not offer information or referrals for alternative means of birth control. *— J. Raloff*

Yeast-made vaccine nearing market

While much recombinant DNA research has used bacteria as the "factory," the first human vaccine made by genetic engineering is expected to be a product of yeast. Initial human trials of a hepatitis B vaccine made by yeast have been encouraging, researchers told SCIENCE NEWS this week, and a spokesperson for the manufacturer says Food and Drug Administration approval is expected in 1986.

Saul Krugman and Morton Davidson of New York University have used the new yeast vaccine on about 250 people. "It's going extremely well," says Krugman. "Ninety-six to 98 percent of the recipients have had an antibody response, and the only occasional complaint is local soreness."

Pearl Toy of San Francisco General Hospital is studying the yeast-made vaccine in infants born to hepatitis B carriers. The vaccine has worked well in the first 30 infants, but it is still too early to tell if it is effective, she says.

After University of California at San Francisco researchers were able to get yeast saddled with hepatitis B virus DNA to synthesize a hepatitis B protein (SN: 8/8/81, p. 84), some of them started Chiron Corp., an Emeryville, Calif., genetic engineering firm whose first project was to produce a yeast-derived hepatitis B vaccine.

They licensed the technology to Merck Sharp & Dohme of West Point, Pa., a drug company that already produces a hepatitis B vaccine purified from the blood of chronic carriers. There is no treatment for hepatitis B infection, which attacks the liver and can lead to death from cancer or cirrhosis. The blood-derived vaccine takes a year to manufacture and costs about $100 for the three-shot regimen — a price that puts it beyond the means of Third World countries, where in some areas as much as 20 percent of the population carries the virus.

The recipe for yeast-engineered products is similar to the bacterial process. Enzymes are used to snip out the DNA that produces the product in question. "Cut-and-paste" enzymes insert the DNA into circular pieces of yeast chromosomes that are then put into yeast. There they float about and produce the desired product, which is harvested by breaking open the yeast.

The advantages of yeast, says Pablo Valenzuela, one of the San Francisco researchers now at Chiron, are that unlike bacteria it doesn't produce toxins; the technology for growing it is well developed; and the species being used — baker's yeast and brewer's yeast — don't infect humans.

Chiron is now testing yeast-made products for osteoarthritis and feline leukemia, and doing toxicology studies on several other yeast-produced agents, says Valenzuela. Researchers at Genentech, Inc., in South San Francisco have gotten yeast to produce interferon (SN: 2/26/83, p. 138), and other companies are working on the process as well. *—J. Silberner*