

Health. A number of bills have been introduced in the House this session, and there are two bills in the Senate. The differences among these bills are relatively minor, and each seeks the same objective: the establishment of an Institute dealing with problems of visual disorders and blindness research.

Mr. Chairman, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is keenly aware of—and determined to solve—the national health problem these visual defects represent. Today, over 40,000 of our citizens are completely blind. Over 400,000 fall within the legal definition of blindness. Over 2 million are estimated to have some visual impairment. We all share an immense stake in the solutions of this problem. Accordingly, the Department has mounted an extraordinarily broad range of programs to do what can be done about each of the types of problems presented. These efforts include programs of education, of vocational rehabilitation, and of income maintenance, which directly assist the visually afflicted. Also included are programs to train the health professional and associated personnel who must provide the required care, and programs to improve the quality and delivery of eye care services to those who need them.

Among all of these departmental efforts, the ones that probe most deeply into the fundamental questions of causation and cure—and therefore are our main hope of ultimate prevention and control—are the research and research training programs of the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness.

Only as we come to understand, through research, the nature of the neurosensory process we call vision, and how defects in it may arise, can we move toward final elimination of these problems. Despite valuable gains in highly pertinent knowledge through eye research over the years, far more answers are still needed than are now in hand. We therefore strongly endorse the strengthened research objective sought through these bills before us today.

The issue for discussion, thus, is not one of objective—where we are in fact fully agreed, but one of means. The question becomes: would a new National Eye Institute strengthen our vision research?

There are many sincere individuals—including a number of distinguished Members of Congress and of the ophthalmology profession—who feel that a new institute is in fact the answer.

We in the department have assessed the pros and cons on this as carefully and as objectively as we can. Certainly the arguments don't go all one way. Nevertheless, on balance, we feel that a new institute is at best unlikely to have a significant strengthening effect on eye research.

We fear, in fact, that it might detract from overall effectiveness by removing eye research from its basic research continuum, and to some extent, by disrupting ongoing programs. Furthermore, a new institute will cost approximately \$800,000 in additional administrative expenses, funds that would be better spent on research.

Let me explain, in some detail, the reasoning behind this position. Accomplishments of the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness have already documented the very significant savings in money and in the reduction of human suffering which can be achieved through research in this field.