

You may have recently read that two researchers supported by NINDB funds have shared the Nobel Prize for medicine. One is Dr. Haldar Keffer Hartline of Rockefeller University who has been a grant recipient for 13 years. The other, Dr. George Wald, of Harvard, received NINDB grants from 1954 through 1961. They were honored for their discoveries in the primary chemical and physiological visual processes in the eye.

During the 15 years since the establishment of NINDB, there have been other notable achievements, including solution of the problem of retrolental fibroplasia, the development of a specific antiviral agent for herpetic conjunctivitis, fundamental advances in the knowledge of structure and function of the eye, and important technical advances in the surgical treatment of retinal detachment. Equally important, a strong program has been created through the establishment of 11 clinical eye research centers and of 12 outpatient clinical research units. To provide research manpower, there are now 53 NINDB-supported training programs. An estimated 1,500 individuals have received training within such federally supported centers. A large proportion of these former trainees are continuing to retain their academic appointments on a part-time basis.

There are thus strong elements in existence for continuing and improving our eye research. We question the necessity, and in fact the desirability of creating a separate, new administrative structure for this purpose.

Several points have been advanced in favor of the establishment of a separate institute for eye research.

Unquestionably, the establishment of a separate institute would be satisfying and encouraging to those concerned with blindness research, and would provide a clear focus for their efforts to bring the story of eye research needs to Congress and to the public. Would this increase eye research funding significantly? It might, but this isn't clear. The record indicates that Congress has always been especially sensitive to the needs of vision research within the NINDB, and has appropriated additional money on several occasions specifically for this area. Moreover, the limiting factor for eye research is not primarily one of dollars. The main problems are in the area of trained manpower and good research ideas. It is difficult to see, therefore, how the capability of the Congress to provide effectively for expanded eye research would be increased by the establishment of a separate administrative structure for the program.

To date, the proportion of funds allocated by NINDB to blindness has reflected reasonably accurately the quality of the research proposals it has received. Thus the growth of eye research has depended upon the growth of the capability of the field. The proportion of NINDB's funds actually awarded for eye research has shown a slight, but progressive, increase. The proportion of applications paid is almost identical with that across NINDB programs and, significantly, above that across all NIH programs. For example, in 1966, of applications to NINDB relative to vision, 36 percent were paid; of all applications to NIH, 23 percent. There is, thus, no evidence that blindness research is being discriminated against within the present institute. Again, if a special effort is to be made for eye research, the administrative structure within which it is developed is not the primary issue.