

Researchers fear wallop of mandated budget cuts

Mass. would be hit hard; labs are urged to lobby

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WASHINGTON — Craig Mello knows well the intricate building blocks of life, but in the science of politics and federal budgets, the Nobel Prize winner from the University of Massachusetts Medical Center is no expert.

Yet here he was recently in an opulent Senate office, warning the likes of Senators Tom Harkin of Iowa and John Kerry of Massachusetts and Bay State Representatives Edward Markey and James McGovern that looming budget cuts would devastate medical research throughout the country, particularly in Massachusetts.

“You haven’t made your case,” Mello recalled Kerry telling him, not as criticism but as encouragement. Markey chimed in, urging the researcher to put down his microscope and pick up a megaphone to get his voice heard across Capitol Hill.

Faced with the loss of billions of dollars in projected research funding, worried researchers are leaving laboratories to roam the halls of Washington to fight cuts they contend will set back research on cancer, Alzheimer’s, and other diseases.

The cause of the consternation is \$1.2 trillion in mandated cuts over the next decade across the federal budget spectrum, a process known as sequestration that is the legacy of the budget-cutting deal last summer.

gene scientist

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Last fall’s debt super-committee, of which Kerry was a member, could not bridge ideological differences over spending and taxes to avoid the budget cuts. In all, it calls for \$110 billion in cuts to be made next year, half of which are to fall on defense programs and the rest to be shared across other programs, including scientific and medical research.

Persuading Washington to roll back the looming cuts could be particularly daunting for researchers as they compete for the ear of Congress amid the growing din, much of it emanating from defense industry boosters.

“The question is how do we make the case? How do we show the doubters that there is value in what we’re doing? It’s absolutely wrong to be talking about cutting in this area,” said Mello, whose Nobel-winning research was funded by grants from the National Institutes of Health. The research centers on blocking certain functions of genes, a potentially fertile area for finding cures to such diseases as cancer. He currently receives a four-year NIH grant valued at \$225,000 a year.

Massachusetts would be especially hard hit because the state is the nation’s biggest NIH beneficiary per capita. Last year, Bay State researchers received nearly \$2.5 billion through about 4,930 NIH grants.

The state could be stripped of \$275 million in research funding if the cuts proceed, putting hundreds of grants at risk.

“The uncertainty is damaging. It’s damaging to your psyche,” said Phillip Sharp, a researcher and professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research, “because you have a large knife hanging over your neck.”

Nationally, the automatic cuts would mean \$3.6 billion less for medical research in 2013, according to estimates by Research!America, a Washington-based advocacy group. The Congressional Budget Office estimates 7.8 percent would be cut from the NIH budget, amounting to about \$2.5 billion in the coming year.

“There would be no way to spare any field of medical research,” said NIH director Francis Collins at a June 21 hearing convened by a House health subcommittee.

A recent study by United for Medical Research predicts the NIH cuts would result in 30,000 fewer jobs across the United States and a \$4.5 billion decrease in economic activity.

“Despite everyone giving speeches about the future and the importance of innovation, Washington’s gone off the rails when it comes to investing in the NIH,” Kerry said. “This research directly benefits public health and helps drive local economies, especially in Massachusetts.”

The fate of research funds will depend on how the political gamesmanship in Washington plays out. Democrats could allow the Bush-era tax cuts to expire at the end of the year as scheduled, allowing the federal budget to recoup \$3 trillion in revenues — more than enough to cover the looming cuts, although Democrats want the tax cuts to remain for those making less than \$250,000 annually. It’s unlikely the matter will be resolved before the November elections.

“I don’t mean to be crass about it, but my attitude is that there are a lot more constitutional responsibilities other than medical research,” said Representative Brian Bilbray, a Republican whose San Diego district includes some of the country’s biggest military bases and is a center for stem cell research.

Fiscal conservatives say it’s time Congress addresses what they see as bloated federal budgets. “We have a huge problem, and we need to back everyone away from the trough,” said Daniel Mitchell, an economist with the Cato Institute.

“It’s silly for anybody to make these assertions that the world is going to end” if their budgets are cut, he said.

But NIH boosters say the pending cuts would hamper the ability of the United States to remain competitive with China and India in developing drugs and therapies.

Instead of writing scholarly papers, some researchers are penning newspaper op-eds to plead their case. Others, including MIT’s Sharp, are eschewing some lectures at scientific symposiums in favor of addressing business groups to preach about boosting one of the country’s most robust economic engines.

Moses Chao, a professor of cell biology, took a more direct approach in March when he traveled from his offices at the New York University Medical Center to meet with members of Congress.

“Everybody was pretty supportive of research,” recalled Chao, who met mostly with Republicans. But when the discussion turned to funding, the tone shifted. The political reality was disconcerting, because even the usual allies could hardly be reassuring.

“It’s an ideological issue about what to do about the budget,” he said, “and nothing to do with research.”