
A Call To Bring Back the Lasker Awards

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Perhaps more surprising than the news that this year's Lasker awards have been suspended (*The Scientist*, March 19, 1990, page 7) was the way the news was announced—or not announced: More than a month after reports of the suspension, the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation still had not officially announced or explained its action or the prospects for a resumption of the highly respected awards.

In a recent conversation, Alice Fordyce, Mary Lasker's sister and the foundation's executive vice president, confirmed that she and the other Lasker trustees had decided to suspend the awards for 1990 while they reassess the foundation's priorities. Since they don't announce each year that they're going to be making the awards, Fordyce said, the trustees simply saw no reason to announce that they weren't going to be making them this year.

Scientists nationwide have reacted with disappointment and astonishment. After all, the Lasker prizes are widely viewed as America's most coveted medical research awards; they are also regarded, and justifiably so, as "predictors" of the Nobel Prizes. Since the Lasker Foundation began making its annual awards in 1944,

49 winners have gone on to become Nobelists, most recently cancer researchers J. Michael Bishop and Harold Varmus. They received the Lasker Award for basic research in 1981, and—as forecast last fall in *The Scientist* (Oct. 2, 1989, page 14)—they shared last year's Nobel in medicine.

Given the Lasker awards' enviable record, why are they being suspended? One possibility is the high cost of administration, travel, and luncheons. And, in fact, the foundation reportedly spent about \$750,000 in each of the last few years to administer the awards and for special grants. But reports put the foundation's assets at well over \$2 million. Even though that figure is down from about \$4.5 million in 1980, it does seem enough to continue to endow the \$15,000 stipend accompanying each prize.

Fordyce confirmed that financial concerns were not a key factor in suspending the awards. In fact, she said, several parties have volunteered to help in the event that financial problems do become an issue.

Another possibility is controversy. As pointed out in *The Scientist's* recent article, last year's award to Etienne-Emile Baulieu—the French scientist who developed the RU 486

“abortion pill”—stirred the anger of antiabortionists. But again, Fordyce denies that RU 486 controversies played any role in the trustees’ decision.

It would be a tragedy for American science if so respected and prestigious a research prize as the Lasker awards died. But there is one hopeful precedent: According to Fordyce, a similar moratorium in 1961 lasted only one year.

So perhaps the tragedy can be averted by a persistent outpouring of support, which has already begun. So far no one has suggested that the foundation stop the awards, and many—including eminent scientists—have urged that they continue.

Fordyce acknowledged that the Lasker board may be influenced by reactions from the scientific com-

munity, and she and the board invite comment. To offer yours, write to the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation, 870 United Nations Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10017, or call (212) 753-8222.

When pressed on the ultimate fate of the Lasker awards, Fordyce said she has a feeling they’re coming back. Let’s do more than hope so. Mary Lasker established her place in the history of biomedical research. She demonstrated how an individual benefactor can catalyze the entire community into an appreciation of the need for basic research. She helped determine the course of cancer research in the U.S. And her role in lobbying Congress to increase NIH support every year is the quintessential prototype of creative philanthropy. ■