ASM Endorses NIH Reauthorization Bill

The ASM Public and Scientific Affairs Board endorsed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Reform Act of 2006 (HR6164) in a 19 September letter to Representative Joe Barton, Chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. The legislation, which the House of Representatives passed on 27 September, authorizes 5% increases in funding for the NIH annually through fiscal year 2009. The ASM had commented on the draft legislation in August of 2005. A number of the ASM’s concerns with the draft legislation were addressed in the final House bill. The legislation establishes a formal strategic planning process for the entire NIH research portfolio through the establishment of the Division of Program Coordination, Planning and Strategic Initiatives, but does not change the authority of individual institutes and centers to conduct their planning, priority setting, and research activities. Through the Division, the Director of NIH is authorized to identify research that is important to the advancement of biomedical science and involves the responsibilities of more than one institute or center. Trans-NIH research may include important areas of emerging scientific opportunities, rising public health challenges, or knowledge gaps that deserve special emphasis and would benefit from additional research that involves collaboration between two or more institutes or centers. The bill establishes a “common fund” to provide a permanent funding mechanism for trans-NIH research. The common fund is a reserve account that may be competitively drawn from by institutes and investigators. The common fund is to grow to 5% of the total NIH budget, based on overall increases made through the annual appropriations process. A new advisory council, the “Council of Councils,” will review the trans-NIH proposals and make recommendations about projects to be funded. The bill establishes a formal, public process to review the structural organizational design of the NIH every seven years. A scientific management review group will evaluate the structural design of the NIH and recommend changes after a statutorily required public process. A comprehensive electronic reporting system is established to catalogue all the research activities of the NIH to increase transparency and provide greater accountability of funding. The ASM comment letters are available at http://www.asm.org/Policy/index.asp?bid=45476.

ASM Participates in Pandemic Influenza Lab Preparedness Meeting

Vickie Baselski, chair of the ASM Public and Scientific Affairs Board Committee on Professional Affairs, and Jim Snyder, member of the Committee on Professional Affairs, participated in a meeting to discuss surveillance and diagnostic testing capacity for pandemic influenza preparedness. The meeting was organized by the Association of Public Health Laboratories in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Influenza Division, and took place on 5 October in Atlanta. Representatives from public health laboratories, clinical laboratories, and other professional groups (American Clinical Laboratory Association, American Society for Clinical Pathology, ASM, College of American Pathologists, and the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists) attended the meeting. In addition, the Food and Drug Administration and CDC’s Coordinating Center for Infectious Diseases, Influenza Division, Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Program, and the Office of Technology Transfer were invited to participate. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss and develop potential strategies that states and the CDC can use to build and maintain pandemic influenza diagnostic capacity in the public and private sector.

ASM Represented at LRN Meeting

On 28 September, Joe Campos represented ASM at the Laboratory Response Network (LRN) partners meeting, in Silver Spring, Md. Updates were provided by Federal Agency partners including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Department of Homeland Security, the Environmental Protection Agency, and others. CDC reported that a reverse transcriptase PCR (RT-PCR) assay for influenza A H5 virus
ASM Submits Comments on CMS Proposed Lab Payment Determinations for 2007

On 26 September 2006, ASM sent comments to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) regarding its proposed payment determinations for new tests to be included in the 2007 Medicare Clinical Laboratory Fee Schedule. ASM stated its concern about CMS’s proposed payment determination for 8749x [infectious agent detection by nucleic acid (DNA or RNA); enterovirus, amplified probe technique]. ASM recommended that CMS crosswalk the new test code to 87798 [infectious agent detection by nucleic acid (DNA or RNA), not otherwise specified; amplified probe technique, each organism], plus 83902 (molecular diagnostics; reverse transcription).

ASM also commented on CMS’s proposed revisions to the Physician Fee Schedule for Calendar Year 2007, which included a section codifying the process by which CMS sets payment methodology for new laboratory tests covered under the Medicare Clinical Laboratory Fee Schedule. ASM’s statements can be downloaded by going to http://www.asm.org/Policy/index.asp?bid=13580.

ASM Participates in CDC Partners’ Meeting

On 29 September, ASM staff member Suzy Leous participated in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Partners’ Meeting on Criteria and Objectives. The purpose of the meeting was for CDC to present both its proposed criteria and starter objectives to determine future activities for the Agency, and for Partners to discuss the objectives and provide comments. CDC hopes to have the objectives refined by the end of the year, based on feedback from the 19–20 September meeting as well as five other public meetings which occurred in the Fall. For more information about the meeting, go to http://www.cdc.gov/osi/goals/workshopPartners.html. To view CDC’s starter objectives, go to http://www.cdc.gov/osi/goals/AllStarterObjectives921.pdf.

ASM Attends CLIAC Meeting

On 20–21 September, ASM staff member Suzy Leous attended the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Advisory Committee (CLIAC) meeting in Atlanta, Ga. CLIAC members were provided updates by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. Several presentations on the future of health laboratory practice, future directions in laboratory technology, and interfaces between the laboratory and clinicians were also provided. CLIAC is comprised of 20 members including Barbara Robinson-Dunn, Jared Schwartz, David Smalley, and Gerri Hall, who are also members of ASM. To read the full summary of the meeting, go to http://www.asm.org/Policy/index.asp?bid=45957.

ASM Attends G-2 Lab Institute Meeting

Vickie Baselski, Chair of the ASM Public and Scientific Affairs Board Committee on Professional Affairs, attended the annual G-2 Lab Institute in Arlington, Va., at the end of September. Sessions were dedicated to updates on the forthcoming Medicare Competitive Bidding Demonstration Program for Laboratory Services and the Medically Unlikely Edits proposal being implemented by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; the Food and Drug Administration’s new policy guidance on in-house-developed laboratory tests; and other laboratory-related issues, including electronic health records, molecular testing, laboratory automation, and updates on avian influenza and pandemic influenza. The meeting also included a session assessing the political outlook for the midterm elections and its implications for national health care policy.