OTHERS ARE SAYING...

Please check why these cures are being withheld

Ignoring Cancer

If the federal department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) really wants a breakthrough in cancer research, it's discovered a unique way of showing it.

The department, over the last two years of Joseph Califano's regime, has become a bottleneck for new discoveries which could hold the promise of early detection — and control — of cancer.

But HEW is hung up on who should retain patent rights over such discoveries — the government or the scientists who develop the pioneering techniques.

Unable to make up its mind, HEW thus prevents the clinical testing of such discoveries by companies that would ultimately manufacture and distribute the compounds.

In this limbo, scientists lose interest as their discoveries languish. And manufacturers turn to other pursuits, leaving the various products unconfirmed as to their value and in short supply if they do have merit.

Two examples have recently come to light.

Two government-funded scientists at opposite ends of the world discovered revolutionary techniques for treating cancer.

In Israel, Dr. Michael Sela found an early detection blood test for breast and digestive-tract cancer.

At the University of Arizona, Dr. Sydney Salmon discovered a simple lab test for cancer that can be conducted in test tubes rather than on patients, thus eliminating painful drugs.

HEW lawyers, apparently arguing that hospital costs will go up if the patents are privately held, won't clear the way for testing while the debate rages.

Now, it can be argued that the scientists are being selfish in pursuit of the profit motive.

It also can be argued that politics is taking precedence over science.

The one irrefutable fact is that something has become lost in the test of wills — the commitment to human life and the preservation of it through cancer-fighting chemicals.

Surely, the government's investment in these discoveries becomes lost as time drags on and more patients die and other techniques come to the fore.

So why the impasse?

Sen. Robert Dole, R-Kansas, made this very serious charge the other day: "HEW has decided to pull the plug on development of biomedical research. They have decided to withhold potential cures and revolutionary new diagnostic techniques for treating such diseases as cancer, arthritis, hepatitis and emphysema."

Is it really too difficult to put priorities where they belong — on human life?

Is it beyond human vision to devise a way whereby government could recover its investment while at the same time rewarding the scientist or the pharmaceutical company for their daring and discovery?

Certainly, to shut and lock the door on such cancer breakthroughs serve neither the cause of science or compassion or profit.

Sensing this, no doubt, and prodded by Senator Dole, Califano the other day ordered a number of potential cures freed for further testing and distribution.

That is the least that an afflicted public should expect.

Cancer poses enough frustrations and heartaches without the HEW adding one, even fractional, delay in delivering treatment to the sick.

—Morning Star, Rockford