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NEWS OF THE WEEK

SCIENTIFIC PRIZES:

U.S. National Medals: For Men Only?

Jeffrey Mervis

Any day now, the Bush Administration will announce the eight winners of the 2006 National Medal of Science, touted as "the country's highest honor for scientific achievement." For the first time in 4 years, the honorees will include a woman. That's a terrible record, say advocates of greater diversity in science, and sends a disturbing message about who is capable of doing world-class science.



CREDIT: THE NATIONAL MEDAL OF SCIENCE

"I'm a female engineer, and I'm appalled," confesses Mayra Montrose, who manages the program at the National Science Foundation. "It's unbelievable."

The paucity of women also extends to the National Medal of Technology, a similarly prestigious award run by the Commerce Department. Only three women have been honored as individuals since the program began in 1983, and none since 1996. (Each class typically also features corporate winners, ranging from a team of scientists to the entire company. The 2005 winners announced earlier this month, for example, feature a female member of a group at Wyeth Pharmaceuticals that developed a children's pneumococcal vaccine.) It's certainly not a new phenomenon: Of the 425 science medalists since 1962, only 30--about 7%--are women. And there have never been more than two in a single year.

Advocacy groups aren't accusing the selection committees, which typically include several women, of bias. Instead, they point to a culture that undervalues the contributions of women, along with a tendency of women to be less aggressive in seeking such honors. The combination, they say, results in a trickle of nominations. That appears to be the case for the science medals. The pool of 188 candidates reviewed last year, for example, included 11 women--the same percentage as their

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The phenomenon also suggests an obvious solution: Get more women to apply. That's precisely the goal of Project RAISE (Recognition of the Achievements of Women In Science, Medicine, and Engineering), run by the Society for Women's Health Research and aimed at awards programs of all types. "There's a certain skill involved in the application process, and we need to help women learn how to do it well," says co-founder Stephanie Pincus, a former chair of the department of dermatology at the University of Buffalo, New York.

Pincus says she was shocked to learn how few nominations of either sex--about three to four dozen--are submitted each year to the two national medal selection committees. (Anyone can nominate anyone, including oneself, and a nomination remains active for 4 years.) The low number suggests that efforts such as RAISE can play an important role. "Boosting the number of applications won't solve the problem, but it's an important first step," she argues.

Members of the selection committees agree that something needs to happen. "It's definitely an issue for the committee," says Linda Katehi, provost of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and a member of the technology medals panel. "We have people from diverse backgrounds in science, and we need to find a way to recognize them."



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