THE FAIRY GODMOTHER OF MEDICAL RESEARCH

MARY LASKER HAS WRESTED MONEY OUT OF CONGRESS FOR NEARLY HALF A CENTURY, AND SHE'S STILL GOING STRONG

If anyone looks the part of the society grande dame it is Mary Lasker. Petting her white cat named Marshmallow, this rosy-cheeked octogenarian holds court surrounded by art in the immaculate, all-white interior of her home in Greenwich, Conn. But Lasker doesn't spend her time sponsoring charity balls and other decorous affairs. Instead, she pushes her weight around in Washington, D. C., where she ranks among the most powerful lobbyists on Capitol Hill.

For nearly half a century, Lasker has been the fairy godmother for U. S. medical research. Although a series of recent strokes has slowed her down, she scored her most recent victory last November at the age of 84, when Congress set up a separate institute at the National Institutes of Health for the study of arthritis. Now, Lasker is lobbying to raise money for AIDS research and endocrine diseases, such as osteoporosis, diabetes, and growth disorders. "I'm infuriated when I hear that anyone's ill, especially when it's from a disease that virtually nothing is known about," says Lasker.

In the past she has sold paintings from her collection to support medical research. But she has been far more productive at wresting money from the federal government's coffers. Under Lasker's tough-as-nails prodding, congressional appropriations for the National Institutes of Health ballooned from a modest $2.4 million in 1945 to $5.5 billion in 1986. "Mary sees herself as a catalyst who occasionally has to go against convention to stir up interest in a particular subject," says Michael F. White, associate director for the National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute.

MORTALITY. Lasker turned to lobbying soon after she married advertising genius Albert D. Lasker in 1940. Haunted by the strokes that killed her parents and a family cook's death from cancer, she was determined to push the government into supporting medical research, most of which was then privately funded. Lacking political connections of her own, she used her husband's ties as well as his $80 million fortune.

She pestered members of Congress in their offices and visited Washington's most notorious budget-cutters, reminding them of their own mortality. Nor was the White House off limits. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower was about to veto a 1961 health appropriations bill, Lasker turned to one of his golfing buddies to arrange a meeting between the President and Harvard University cancer researcher Sidney Farber. The bill escaped veto. Lasker's charm, says one Washington insider, has turned "dozens of Congress members and Presidents into mush."

LASKER: "YOU CAN SOLVE ANY PROBLEM IF YOU HAVE MONEY, PEOPLE, AND EQUIPMENT"

She has been equally good at wooing the nation's top medical researchers. With her flair for the dramatic, she established an award in her husband's name in 1944. Although it carries only a $15,000 honorarium, it has become the most sought-after award in U. S. medical research. And 42 winners of Albert Lasker Awards later won Nobels.

But when it comes to selling Congress, Lasker relies on a trusted circle of celebrity friends. "Doctors aren't used to selling anything," she says flatly, noting that few medical researchers have the pizazz of her longtime friend and lobbying ally, heart surgeon Michael E. DeBakey. Last month, when Lasker was trying to get attention for AIDS, she persuaded Elizabeth Taylor to appear at a congressional hearing—as did a small army of reporters. In past efforts, Lasker called on such attention-getters as actress Irene Dunne, Hollywood mogul Louis B. Mayer, and industrialist Norton W. Simon.

FORESIGHT. Yet Lasker's success relies on substance as much as style. Her targets say she is well-informed, aware of medical advances, and always armed with charts and figures that make her point. "Lasker has vision, information, and tenacity," says Thomas E. Bryant, chairman of the Public Committee on Mental Health, a citizens' group in Washington. "When the lady wants something, she goes out and gets it." In 1980, Lasker foresaw the medical potential of genetic engineering and paid a visit to a then-fledgling Genentech Inc. More recently, she called on Columbia University psychiatrists to discuss advances in drugs against depression.

Lasker's tenacity sometimes draws criticism. She has been accused of overestimating the ability of researchers to conquer complex ills such as cancer. Other critics complain that she tends to divert funds to scientifically unrealistic goals—such as developing a vaccine against cancer. Lasker bristles at the charges. "Nobody knows the full picture about many of these diseases, so how does anyone know what's an unrealistic demand and what isn't?" she asks.

For every detractor, Lasker has a legion of boosters. She was honored on June 26 at a black-tie affair to mark the 40th anniversary of the passage of the National Mental Health Act, which Lasker shepherded through Congress to set up a mental health institute. She has already earned some three dozen honorary awards and degrees, including the prestigious Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award in the U. S.

Lasker has no intention of resting on her laurels. She still calls on members of Congress, even though she exerts most of her political clout through lobbyist Terry L. Lierman, a hard-driving former Senate staffer who says he's her "eyes and ears in Washington." And she is confident that her efforts will pump more funding into the fight against AIDS and other diseases. That, she says, is because she has proven that "you can solve any problem if you have money, people, and equipment."

By Sana Siwolop in New York, with Jerry Brazda in Washington