

news in brief

● US Academy confirms saccharin as potential carcinogen:

THE US National Academy of Sciences has confirmed that the artificial sweetener saccharin can cause cancer in laboratory animals, and that it is probably a 'low potency' carcinogen in humans.

In a report prepared at the request of Congress, which last year imposed an 18-month moratorium on a proposed ban of saccharin by the Food and Drug Administration, an academy review panel says that "even low risks applied to a large number of exposed persons may lead to public health concerns".

The panel says that saccharin may also enhance the potency of other cancer-causing agents, and suggests that it may in fact be more dangerous as a 'promoter' of other carcinogens than as a carcinogen itself.

The panel also expresses concern at the increasing quantities of saccharin being consumed by young children, mostly in diet soft drinks. The length of time which cancer takes to develop could mean that such children have a magnified chance of developing cancer later in life, the panel says in its report.

● Reprocessing plant still closed:

Employees at the Windscale reprocessing plant are still waiting for British Nuclear Fuels Ltd and the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate to decide when to re-start the reprocessing of nuclear waste. The plant was closed two weeks ago after a potentially explosive build-up of hydrogen in one of the silos where magnox cladding material is stored. In a reply to questions from the conservation group Friends of the Earth, the Department of Energy said workers were not in danger from the release of radioactivity from the silo, but reprocessing would not restart until an investigation revealed the cause of the build-up of hydrogen and if any measures needed to be taken to prevent a recurrence. A number of questions remain to be answered. For example, why, after 15 years of storing magnox in this manner, has the build-up of hydrogen not occurred before? A spokesman for British Nuclear Fuels told *Nature* that they wanted to be sure they understood what had happened before restarting reprocessing.

● US judge claims low levels of PBBs "not toxic".

A county circuit court judge in Michigan has ruled that the low levels of polybrominated biphenyls (PBBs) to which cattle in the state were exposed after fire retardant had been mistakenly mixed with animal feed, were "not toxic". As a result, he dismissed a claim for damages issued by a Michigan farmer who slaughtered his herd on realising that they had eaten contaminated feed provided unknowingly by the Farm Bureau Services, a farmers' cooperative, in 1973. In a 177-page opinion handed down after the longest trial in state history, Judge William Peterson said that the animals had been slaughtered needlessly because of public fear aroused by "incompetent and dishonest" scientists, veterinarians and lawyers who, he claimed, were trying to capitalise on the disaster.

Fears about the potential carcinogenicity of PBB have been raised because all other halogenated aromatic hydrocarbons tested to date have turned out to be carcinogenic. Research on PBB is now being carried out at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. However, referring to the arguments of those who had warned of the potential long-term hazards of low-level exposure to PBBs, Judge Peterson said: "Professionals have forsaken objectivity and their usual standards of inquiry to accept unquestioningly,

as a basis for their expressed opinions, reported facts that were not factual."

● \$1.5 million to erect statue of Einstein:

The US National Academy of Sciences announced this week that it is to erect a statue of Albert Einstein, three times life-size in the academy's grounds on Washington's Constitution Avenue. The statue, which will be unveiled next spring in a ceremony honouring the centennial of Einstein's birth, will be carried out by Robert Burks, who sculpted a portrait head of the physicist in 1953. The cost of the statue, the base and the ground preparation will be more than \$1.5 million. A fund-raising campaign is being organised by the academy among the US technical community.

Announcing the plans for the statue this week, Dr Philip Handler, president of the NAS, said: "It is our hope that this statue will serve several public purposes—as a tribute to the enormous analytical and creative powers of this unique scientist to whom we owe so much, as an evocation of his profound spirituality and his concern for mankind, as a reminder that Einstein found in this country refuge from tyranny, and finally as an appreciation of the accepted place of science in our civilisation."

Meanwhile, in Europe, two interdisciplinary scientific meetings in Munich and Ulm marked the beginning of an international series of meetings to be held throughout 1979 to commemorate Einstein's birth on March 18, 1879. At the meeting in Ulm, Paul Dirac, who worked with Einstein at Cambridge and Princetown and who was awarded the Nobel Prize for physics in 1933, paid a tribute to "the excellence of Einstein's theory of gravitation".

● Indian shuffle:

The new Secretary in the Indian Department of Science and Technology is Professor M. G. K. Menon. He will also serve as director-general of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research. These posts became vacant with the departure of Dr A. Ramachandran to head the UN Centre on Habitat in Nairobi. Professor Menon is at present chairman of the Electronics Commission and secretary to the Department of Electronics and was for several years scientific adviser to the Minister of Defence. Well-known in the international science policy world, he has served as a member of the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Committee on the Application of Science and Technology to Development. His research in the fields of cosmic rays and elementary particles was largely done at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, of which he was director from 1966 to 1975.

● Britain joins in China exchange:

China is continuing to expand its scientific cooperation with western countries. Up to 100 Chinese research workers are to come to UK scientific laboratories for periods of about four years, under the terms of an agreement between the Royal Society and Mr Hu Ke-shih, vice-president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which was signed on 10 November. Mr Hu was leader of a delegation of scientists and Academy administrators who have just concluded a three-week visit to the United Kingdom as guests of the Royal Society. The group visited many university departments and research establishments such as the Rutherford Laboratory at Chilton and the Imperial Cancer Research Fund Laboratories in London. The agreement comes soon after a similar deal to exchange post-graduate students between China and the United States.