Neuroscience

Snyder's pad

Washington

The Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore has joined the growing ranks of United States research universities in announcing its intention to set up a new department devoted to neuroscience. This will be the first new department to have been established at the medical school for twenty years. Under the direction of the new department's chairman, Dr Solomon H. Snyder, who will become the medical school's first professor of neuroscience, its research will be concerned with the chemical and pharmacological aspects of brain function. Dr Snyder, joint winner of the 1978 Albert Lasker Basic Medical Research Award for his work on the actions of neurotransmitters and, in particular, on the functioning of opiate drugs, is this year's president of the American Society of Neurosciences.

The proposal to set up the department was made by an *ad hoc* group appointed by

the medical school last autumn. The committee said that there were "compelling academic grounds" for a new department and pointed out that although knowledge in the field of neuroscience dovetailed with that in other disciplines, there was now a common body of knowledge and methodological approaches shared by people trained and working in neuroscience.

Bringing together the neurological aspects of various traditional disciplines into a single department will have organizational as well as academic advantages. According to Dr Steven Muller, president of Johns Hopkins University, "although Hopkins has universally recognized strength in several areas of neuroscience, the School of Medicine now needs the cohesive focus in neurobiology so necessary for the develop-

ment of exciting and rigorous teaching programmes for medical students and for predoctoral and postdoctoral students in neuroscience".

One of the immediate research interests of the new department will be a study of effects of Huntington's disease on enzyme activity in the brain. This will form part of a nine-project research programme on the disease which last week received a grant of \$1.8 million from the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke.

David Dickson

Byelorussian graduates

Missing out

Young Byelorussian graduates are failing to take up their appointed posts in the Soviet national economy, according to a recent survey by the Byelorussian SSR State Committee for Labour.

According to Soviet practice, all young persons completing higher education must work for a prescribed period (usually three years), in whatever post the relevant ministry assigns to them. These posts can be anywhere in the Soviet Union, not necessarily in their own home republic. In Byelorussia, however, the system seems to have broken down. In 1978, says the survey, over 3,000 newly qualified specialists — just under 5% of the total — failed to turn up at their appointed enterprises.

In all, out of the 120,000 persons holding higher qualifications in agriculture 41,000 are now working in non-agricultural jobs, 10,000 with teaching qualifications are not teaching and 13,000 university and technical college graduates are working in branches of industry, building and transport unrelated to their education. Over 25% of the young specialists who have graduated in the past four years are now doing jobs which require no higher qualifications.

The ministries themselves, it appears, are partly to blame. A spokesman for the Byelorussian State Committee for Labour explained that many ministries distribute their young graduates at random, often switching them from the job for which they were originally destined letting them go off and find work for themselves, or terminating their assigned job earlier than scheduled. An increasing number of departments are refusing to employ graduates along the lines for which they have been trained. Cases of patronage and "protection" are also said to account for an unspecified number of graduates failing to fulfil their "civil obligations" of directed work.

Nor surprisingly, the professional skill of management workers in Byelorussian industry and agriculture is also said to be "rather low" and causing "great concern."

Vera Rich

Radiation risks

Twice lucky?

Washington

After a year of intense internal debate, the US National Academy of Science has issued a report revising its earlier estimates of the health risks of low-level radiation, and indicating that these may be lower than it had previously suggested.

In particular, academy scientists have qualified their support for the linear "no threshold" model for predicting dose-response relationships at low levels of radiation. They now say that, given all the uncertainties involved, a linear quadratic relationship is more likely to be realistic and that the linear hypothesis should be considered merely to define the upper limits of risk.

The report, which was prepared by the Academy's Committee on the Biological Effects of Ionizing Radiation (the BEIR Committee) and was commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency, does not recommend specific exposure levels. But its findings are likely to reduce pressure on the agency to develop more stringent regulations.

The committee's conclusions, however, are still under fire. The chairman of the subcommittee on somatic effects, Dr Edward Radford, claims that support for the linear hypothesis was downgraded on the basis of a biased selection of data, giving too much weight to laboratory studies and not enough to epidemiological evidence. Another committee member, Dr Harald Rossi claims that the committee has not gone far enough in its revisions, and that the dangers are still being overstated.

The BEIR Committee first gave its support to the linear hypothesis in its initial report, published in 1972. Given the many uncertainties surrounding attempts to estimate the effects of low-level radiation, and in particular the impossibility of providing conclusive statistical evidence based solely on epidemiological studies, the committee proposed the linear hypothesis as a basis for regulation.

Since then, it has been used as the basis for standard setting by the EPA. But it has been challenged by the nuclear industry, which claims that it provides an unrealistic assessment of the health risks of nuclear power, and thus could lead to overly-restrictive legislation.

The BEIR committee came out with a revised version of its report last spring. It again endorsed the linear dose-response relationship as a basis for regulation and provided estimates of the several hundred additional cancer deaths per million population that would result from continuous exposure to one rad of radiation.

Publication of the report, however, brought into the open a fierce debate which had until then taken place within the committee over how much weight to give to