

Cancer Institute withholds grant

Straus denies fresh charges of impropriety

Washington

The running battle between the US National Cancer Institute (NCI) and research scientist Dr Mark Straus of the New York Medical College (NYMC) in Valhalla, New York State, entered a new round last week when the institute announced it was suspending part of Dr Straus's current grant because of failure to comply with federal rules on the use of human subjects in research.

Dr Vincent DeVita, the director of NCI, has also informed the medical college that the final part of the three-year, \$910,000 grant is being withheld from the beginning of March on the basis of a site-visit team's report that there has been "minimal progress" in the research into the application of cell kinetics to chemotherapy.

Dr Straus has angrily denied both the charges. On the first, he argues that his work with human cancer patients has involved only conventional radiotherapy and chemotherapy, and is therefore not covered by federal research rules. On the second, he argues that the conclusions of the visiting team are at variance with reports prepared by three previous visiting teams which each claimed that progress in the research was satisfactory.

Four years ago, Dr Straus was relieved of his position as chief of the oncology department at Boston University after the discovery that patients' records had been falsified in part of a broad survey of cancer treatment, supported by NCI, for which he had been the principal investigator.

Dr Straus, who has denied allegations that he was responsible for the forged data, has since moved to NYMC where he is professor of medicine and chief of the department of oncology. In 1979 he was awarded a three-year grant, beginning in March 1980, to continue his research into cell kinetics following what Dr DeVita has described as a "very good" score by scientific reviewers of his grant application.

Disagreements between Dr Straus and NCI emerged last summer, when NCI was accused by members of the Senate's Labor and Human Resources Committee of failing to take stricter action against him in the light of the Boston allegations. Several senators were especially critical of the fact that Dr Straus had been awarded a new NCI grant even though his previous activities were under investigation.

Dr DeVita defended the grant on the basis of the high marks it had received from reviewers but said that support for the clinical trials proposed in the application

had not been provided. After the Senate hearing, at which he received some harsh criticism from the committee's chairman, Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, Dr DeVita received a strong public vote of confidence from the cancer research community.

The new disagreement between NCI and Dr Straus seems to focus on his treatment of cancer patients with a combination of radiation and the drug 5-fluorouracil (5-FU), which was approved by the Food and Drug Agency as an anti-cancer agent several years ago and is widely used by physicians and clinical oncologists.

NCI contends that even though it was not part of the NCI grant, Dr Straus's use of such treatment was experimental, and that a research protocol should therefore have been submitted to the medical college's institutional review board under

new federal regulations.

Since this was not done, Dr DeVita said in a letter last month to NYMC president Dr John Connolly, the result has been a "material failure to comply with the terms of the grant". The clinical portion of the grant has therefore been suspended "until the matter is resolved to NCI's satisfaction or until the grant is terminated", as required by federal regulations.

Asked to explain how funding for the "clinical portions" of the grant could be suspended if Dr DeVita had previously assured the Senate committee that no clinical work was covered by the grant, NIH officials admitted last week that this had caused some unfortunate confusion. "The statement made last summer should have said that the approved grant did not involve therapeutic research, rather than

Amersham International floats

Amersham International, the supplier of radioactive chemicals being sold off this week by the British government, seems likely to cause a minor sensation on the London Stock Exchange. On Monday this week, the financial community was persuaded that the 50 million shares could have been successfully offered for sale at a higher price than £1.42 each, thus recouping a larger sum for British taxpayers and providing the company with a larger stock of working capital than the £5 million it now expects. As things are, the offer for sale was expected to be heavily oversubscribed.

The sale of Amersham has been on the cards for the past two years, and is broadly welcomed by the management of the company. Arrangements have been made to give each employee £50 worth of shares, and there are also arrangements whereby employees may buy further shares, now and in the future, which will be held in trust for them.

The argument that Amersham is being sold too cheaply derives from the company's rapid growth in recent years and from the relatively high profit (£8.0 million) before tax forecast for the current year. But some in the financial community point out that the offer price is 18.9 times the expected profit after tax, a largeish ratio for conventional businesses but by no means as great as the price of shares in other high-technology companies, electronics for example.

In such circumstances, shares are preferably sold by tender, with the highest bidders being given preference. On this occasion, however, the merchant banks handling the sale of shares appear to have persuaded the British Treasury that a sale by tender would have been too complicated for many would-be investors.

The Treasury seems also to have devised

an ingenious device for assuring the future independence of the company. The government will retain a single "special rights preference share" that will allow it to prevent either a substantial disposal of the assets of the company or a significant change in the pattern of share ownership that might compromise independence.

That Amersham is attractive to investors at this point in its history is easily understood. The company's new plant at Cardiff has come into production within the past year, while the weakening of sterling in relation to the dollar within the past year has necessarily increased the profits of the company, which earns 80 per cent of its revenue outside the United Kingdom. (The prospectus estimates that a five per cent change in the value of sterling implies a ten per cent change in profit.)

Amersham's interest in genetic manipulation through its sale of labelled nucleotides and other materials used in genetic manipulation, at least at the research bench, seems not to have been widely appreciated by the financial press, which may moderate the embarrassment caused to the company's merchant banks by an even more heavily oversubscribed offer than that now in prospect.

The prospectus for the public sale of shares explains that Amersham International owes its existence to a business established in 1940 to refine radium used in the manufacture of self-luminous components for navigational aids. The company employs just over 2,000 people, three-quarters of them in the United Kingdom and most of the remainder in North America and West Germany. In recent years, Amersham has been spending seven per cent of its revenue on research and development. The City of London is impressed; others wonder whether it is enough.

clinical research", an NIH spokesman said, adding that biopsy analysis had been included.

Describing the NCI charges as "outrageous", a research colleague of Dr Straus, Dr Jeffrey Ambinder, insisted last week that only conventional treatment had been used. He read a statement from Dr Straus, who was not available for comment, comparing NCI's claims to a situation in which, if a cancer patient is given an aspirin and then finds the cancer has gone away, "then it should have been submitted to a review board".

NYMC has already set up a subcommittee of its Institutional Review Board to investigate whether the treatment should have been submitted for its approval. Although the subcommittee was established before the site visit by the NCI team, it will now have to decide whether to concur with the visiting team's conclusion that the treatment should have been classified as experimental, or to accept Dr Straus's argument that prior approval was not required.

NCI itself has referred the matter to its Office of Protection from Research Risks to see if any further action should be taken. The institute's verdict on the progress of Dr Straus's research is also likely to generate controversy, since the decision to withhold the third year of the grant — amounting to about \$300,000 — can be taken to appeal by Dr Straus and/or the medical college.

Explaining his actions in the letter to Dr Connolly, Dr DeVita says the decision to withhold the grant followed the visiting team's conclusion that "minimal progress had been made on both the pre-clinical and the clinical cytogenetic studies".

Dr Straus, described by Dr Ambinder as a "brilliant scientist" whose "ethics are beyond reproach", says in his statement that the criticism is incorrect, and that his group had not been supported to carry out the studies which the visiting team says should have been done. Dr Ambinder also defended the research group's use of tritiated thymine, to study the kinetics of cancer cells, which he says had been approved of by the three previous visiting teams but criticized by the last team which visited in November.

Dr Straus is already suing five of his former research colleagues at Boston University for \$33 million, denying the allegations that he had been responsible for the falsified data in the earlier study. Last week he and his lawyer, Andrew Good, were taking depositions from witnesses to establish the basis for his charges of conspiracy.

A full report on the Boston incident is expected to be completed shortly by the Department of Health and Human Services. Meanwhile, staff members of the Senate Health Committee, which was strongly criticized for its treatment of Dr DeVita last summer, said last week that the committee had no further action planned, but was watching events. **David Dickson**

Polish students

Workers help

Help is urgently needed for Polish students penalized under the martial law regulations, according to a clandestine Solidarity bulletin from the Krakow region. The dissolution last month of the Independent Students' Association (NZS) has left the students without any organization to defend them, just when the new rules of conduct for the universities make such protection more necessary than ever. Several former NZS activists have already received prison sentences for allegedly organizing resistance to the military takeover; scores or hundreds more are in internment camps. Those who sign the necessary oath of loyalty and return to their studies face penalties ranging from compulsory "socially useful work" to expulsion and military service even for such minor infractions as cutting lectures or being on campus after hours.

The bulletin notes that the staff of the University of Warsaw have already organized a system of financial and legal aid for students, and are also trying to provide accommodation for those students who have been expelled from their hostels. A similar initiative seems to be under way in Poznan. There, on the declaration of martial law, the deans and deputy deans of the various faculties apparently resigned as a body, but had returned to their posts last week, apparently for the sake of the students, in advance of the riots at the end of the week.

The Krakow bulletin marks an important new development in the Polish democratic movement. Before 1976, there were protests by workers and by intellectuals (including students) but for different causes and on different occasions. After the food-price demonstrations of June 1976, however, intellectuals and students organized legal and material aid to those affected by the wave of police repressions, and were themselves frequently heavily penalized for doing so. This is the first time, however, that a workers' organization has spoken out in defence of intellectuals and students.

The bulletin, which describes the victimized students as "our best young people", coincides with a major propaganda offensive designed to break the ties between workers and intellectuals which developed after 1976 and which are consolidated by Solidarity. At the end of January, Michal Hebda, the rector of Radom Engineering College, whose "undemocratic" appointment triggered the nationwide student strikes last autumn, said on Warsaw radio that the combination of student and worker protests showed that it must have been organized from abroad. Many intellectuals in internment have been creamed off from the general camps and transferred to somewhat more comfortable accommodation.

Most surprising of all is the remark attributed to deputy prime minister Mieczyslaw Rakowski, editor in chief of the weekly *Polityka*, which is due to resume publication shortly. He is reported to have told a staff briefing conference that in his opinion the intellectuals in Solidarity were directly responsible for the imposition of martial law. What finally tipped the balance, he claimed, was the declaration by the Conference of University Rectors that its members should have the right to vote for the Minister of Science, Higher Education and Technology. **Vera Rich**

British anti-nuclear campaign

Pros not all con

The two British veterans of disarmament, Lords Brockway and Noel-Baker, gave their blessing last weekend to a campaign to mobilize British professional opinion against nuclear arms. But the conference at Imperial College, London on 12 February, planned by the World Disarmament Campaign, demonstrated that only the anti-nuclear profession is sure of where it stands.

The theme of the conference was that professional people and even professional organizations have a responsibility to inform the general population of the present danger from the accumulation of nuclear weapons, calculated by Dr Frank Barnaby, until recently director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, as the equivalent of 3 tonnes of TNT per head of the world's population.

British professional organizations were not formally represented at the conference, although Mr Jack Chambers, president of the National Union of Teachers, claimed the backing of an organization with 250,000 members for his demand for a place in the school curriculum for the "teaching of peace". In passing, he protested at the complaints from newspapers that teachers were guilty of "political indoctrination" by telling their students of their "profound distaste for the present levels of armaments" and of the British government's "scandalous support for the United States government on El Salvador".

Dr John Dawson, head of the division responsible for professional questions at the British Medical Association, gave a more temperate account of the association's study of the effects of a nuclear attack on Britain, which should be complete in about a year. He explained that the association's objective was to enable members of the medical profession to make up their own minds. He provoked cries of "Shame!" from some among the audience by saying that the British Medical Association had "no policy" on nuclear weapons, and the ridicule of a psychiatrist from the north of England who asked what purpose could be served by a solemn study of the effects of nuclear weapons on the