The questionnaire proposes that of the three principal sectors of researchers in cancer — biologists, clinicians and epidemiologists — the biologists are "very preponderant". Is it not important today, asks the questionnaire, to reflect on the evolution of this state of affairs "and on the consequences of this primacy given to reductionist approaches?" Biologists tend naturally to choose areas of research as close as possible to fundamental biology, says the questionnaire. "Is this not to the detriment of specific research on cancer?" And, the questionnaire asks, should there not be separate rules for making evaluations of cancer research, so it is not subject to the more fundamental criteria applied by the medical research council (INSERM) and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique?

Such questions have been asked before, notably in the United States, but they are still appropriate and they are expected to produce some vigorous replies in France, with sectional interests being defended in every direction. Once the fur is flying, and the political positions of every sector are evident to all, M. Ralite will make "coherent recommendations". This is democracy.

Robert Walgate

Nuclear war games

No survivors?

Moscow radio last week broadcast a virulent attack on Dr Edward Teller, the American physicist, for having published in *Readers' Digest* an article which suggested that nuclear war would not obliterate all life on this planet.

The broadcast, scripted by the official news agency TASS, alleged that Dr Teller has a vested interest in the arms race, since its "reversal" would deprive him of his "cushy job" as a presidential aide. Teller's article, TASS alleged, was intended to "dampen the truly immense public interest all over the world" in the Soviet peace proposals tabled at the the United Nations.

The Soviet proposal for a total test-ban treaty to create a more favourable atmosphere for arms limitation negotiations ran into considerable opposition from the United States, which maintains that the problems of verifying compliance with any such agreement should be solved before negotiations are started. In fact the Soviet Union put forward a package of verification proposals, including the international exchange of seismic data and the right of signatories to any such treaty to demand an on-site inspection of any suspected explosion in the territory of a fellow signatory. Since the Soviet proposals were backed up by carefully orchestrated panegyrics in the Soviet press the TASS writers may have genuinely assumed that the US rejection of these initiatives has a similar media back-up. Teller's role as "father of the hydrogen bomb" is stressed and the activities of the

Pugwash movement ignored. His attempts to refute some of the more fantastic myths of what nuclear war would entail, his quoting of instances from Hiroshima and Nagasaki ("bridges were open to traffic a day after the blast, trains ran on the second day and streetcars were operating on the third"), and his suggestions on how to remove radioactive contamination are construed, by TASS, as "cynicism and misanthropy".

In fact, Teller's thesis that there would be a significant number of survivors of a war involving nuclear weapons and other "means of mass destruction" has tacitly been accepted by Soviet civil defence

Asbestos hazard

Bankruptcy protects the rich

Washington

The question of liability for the long-term latent occupational diseases of workers has been further muddled by the gigantic Manville Corporation, a mining and manufacturing company that is a pillar of US industry, which has filed for bankruptcy to protect itself from claims from asbestos workers, which the company says, could total as much as \$2,000 million.

The company's action in August threw into turmoil the question of how US corporations deal with occupational health problems, sending other asbestos companies to their lawyers for advice and making claimants and their advocates suspect a fraud. It will be months before the full implications for the declining US asbestos industry, and for other industries with similar problems, are known.

Manville's action was an extraordinary use of the US bankruptcy courts; companies normally file for bankruptcy when their debts have become intolerable in order to prevent outright liquidation. In those circumstances, the court takes charge of settling a corporation's debts, freezing creditors' claims and other lawsuits and dividends paid to shareholders, while a reorganization plan is being agreed.

But Manville is a relatively healthy corporation, although it reported a loss for the first half of 1982 of \$32 million. Its executives believe that the effect of filing for bankruptcy will be, ironically, to make the company still healthier.

Manville, which is the largest US producer of asbestos products used in building, insulation, brake lining, shipbuilding and underground pipes, has 16,500 claims outstanding against it. Its decision to file for bankruptcy was prompted by a study indicating that another 32,000 claims might yet be made, with an average settlement cost of \$40,000.

The asbestos industry in general faces a tidal wave of claims, because there are an estimated nine million people in the United States who have worked in an asbestos-related industry and who might claim damages on account of the risk of develop-

planners. Recent reports of civil defence exercises, including practice evacuation of schools and hospitals, speak of the need for further training in the use of "means of protection against weapons of mass destruction". A broadcast on Vilnius radio last summer by a civil defence official went into considerable details of the various gamma and neutron radiation monitors available to establish contamination of the population and of livestock, machines and equipment — suggesting precisely the same swift return to quasi-normality after nuclear bombardment for which Teller was castigated by TASS.

Vera Rich

ing mesothelioma or asbestosis, maybe many years later.

The law so far has not ruled in favour of the asbestos industry. A lawsuit decided by the Supreme Court of the state of New Jersey last month ruled out as a possible defence a company's ignorance of possible adverse health effects at the time its workers were exposed to asbestos. Awareness of the health hazards of asbestos has been relatively recent. Manville itself (then known as the Johns-Manville Corporation) lost a case in a California court and was forced to pay damages of \$28,000 to a victim over and above the workman's compensation.

The Manville Corporation has also disputed for seven years with its insurance agents the point at which their liability should begin: at the time when the workers were exposed, when the disease appeared or from the time when medical hazards existed. As a result of the filing for bankruptcy, claimants will be able to obtain from the corporation data about what it knew and when. One court has already concluded that Manville concealed knowledge of asbestos hazards. Nevertheless, the corporation has spent \$24.5 million lawyers' fees alone, and has so far paid out \$24 million in damages.

"CONGRATULATIONS! YOU ARE NOW FINANCIALLY AS WELL AS MORALLY BANKRUPT."

By filing for bankruptcy, the corporation can put off paying existing creditors until the courts decide what should be done. In the meantime, no new claims can be filed. In reorganizing itself,