China's science reforms may be less than revolutionary

[TOKYO] Despite drastic plans to streamline the Chinese government, announced at the People's Congress this month, and clear signals that technological innovation has become an important political priority, the administration of basic science in China is unlikely to change significantly, according to some observers.

Plans to reduce the number of state ministries and commissions from 40 to 29 were approved by the congress on 10 March. The State Science and Technology Commission, which is responsible for science and technology policy, will be renamed the Ministry of Science and Technology. The State Education Commission, which oversees university research, will also become a ministry.

But in practice the running of these organizations and their responsibilities are unlikely to alter, says a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which is optimistic about the general possibilities that the reforms are opening up.

The most dramatic changes will take place in ministries related to industry. The Ministry of Chemical Industry will be downgraded to the National Bureau of Petroleum and Chemical Industry by merging with two government-run petroleum companies.

Early warning system for rare diseases planned

[STRASBOURG] The European Parliament last week approved the European Commission's proposal for a five-year research programme on 'rare diseases', a term that covers more than 5,000 conditions, including Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease.

But funding details are not yet clear. The commission has specified a budget of ECU1.2 million (US$1.3 million) for the first year only, whereas the parliament has called for a total of ECU14 million over five years.

European Union research activities will start in 1999. They will include a free database, an early warning system to detect and assess rare diseases and the creation of rapid response teams.

Ministry kept BSE data under wraps for years

[LONDON] The UK Ministry of Agriculture consistently refused access to data on the epidemiology of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), according to a leading British epidemiologist. Roy Anderson, professor of zoology at the University of Oxford, told the BSE inquiry that he was denied access to data despite making several formal approaches between 1989 and 1991.

Anderson said he was eventually given access in 1996 after seeking the help of a former colleague, the chief scientist, Sir Robert May. But he told the inquiry that getting access to the BSE database "continued to be a struggle" in 1997. Anderson said that, if the ministry had made the data available in 1989, researchers would have discovered much earlier that infections were continuing, and the size of the epidemic could have been significantly smaller.

EU considers car makers' offer to cut emissions

[LONDON] Ritt Bjerregaard, the European Union's environment commissioner, has responded cautiously to an offer of voluntary cuts to carbon dioxide emissions from Europe's car makers. The manufacturers have offered to reduce emissions by 25 per cent from 1995 levels. Bjerregaard said she would "study the offer with an open mind".

Europe's environment ministers will meet on 23 March to discuss the offer. The proposed cuts exceed those offered by the industry last year. But in return the industry wants assurances that taxes on diesel cars will not be introduced.

India and Sweden line up joint research projects

[NEW DELHI] Sweden and India have decided to boost their 19-year science cooperation by launching a programme of joint research and development in food processing, environment and energy technology. At a two-day meeting in New Delhi last week, Indian scientists and a 20-member Swedish delegation identified 30 projects for funding.

Sweden proposes to contribute US$5 million over three years. Sweden already spends nearly $860,000 a year in India on joint projects in biotechnology and renewable energy.

Tobacco company found cancer link in 1970

[LONDON] A cigarette company memorandum from 1970 acknowledging "beyond all reasonable doubt" a link between smoking and lung cancer has been uncovered in the United States. The four-page report was sent to the managing director of Gallaher Ltd, a tobacco company being sued by 50 smokers, by the general manager of the company's research department. It is a review of the 'Auerbach experiment' on the effects of cigarette smoke on beagles.

The report said: "One of the striking features of the Auerbach experiment was that practically every dog which smoked suffered significantly from the effects of the smoke either in terms of irritation and bronchitis, pre-cancerous changes, or cancer. The results of the research appear to us to remove the controversy regarding the causation of the majority of human lung cancer."

Gore launches idea for live pictures from space

[WASHINGTON] US Vice-President Al Gore proposed last week that the NASA space agency should launch a satellite by 2000 that would return live images of the Earth from space, 24 hours a day. Pictures from the satellite, which Gore dubbed Triana, would be downloaded from the Internet.

NASA plans to ask the educational, scientific and commerce communities for ideas for a $50 million satellite equipped with an eight-inch telescope and high-definition TV camera. But the project has been derided as a "visual circus" by Dana Rohrabacher (Republican, California), who chairs the NASA oversight subcommittee in the House of Representatives.

Controversial cancer treatment set for trials

[LONDON] The Italian government has set up a commission to oversee clinical trials of a controversial, non-toxic cancer treatment following intense public demand for the drug (see *Nature* 391, 217; 1998). Last week, 20,000 people took to the streets of Rome demanding access to the treatment, devised by Luigi di Bella, a doctor from Modena, northern Italy.

Three experts, chaired by Gordon McVie, director-general of the UK Cancer Research Campaign, will evaluate trials of the therapy, known as MDB (Multiterapia di Bella). Di Bella says treatments should concentrate on encouraging healthy cells to multiply rather than on destroying infected cells.

Astronomy will make Greenwich comeback

[LONDON] The London borough of Greenwich will once again become a focal point for the public appreciation of astronomy, following the decision by the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC) to transfer some of the activities of the Royal Greenwich Observatory back to its original site. The move follows the decision to transfer much of the technical work of the observatory from Cambridge to a new UK Astronomy Technology Centre in Edinburgh. Other activities will be relocated to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. According to PPARC, the partnership with the museum "offers the opportunity of creating a flagship for UK astronomy".