

Sweden urged to stay in CERN but to quit molecular biology lab

[MUNICH] Sweden should give up its membership of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, Germany, according to a government advisory committee, as part of a package to save SKr150 million (US\$19.5 million) in the government's research budget. But the committee does not recommend pulling out of the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) in Geneva, Switzerland, one of the options it had been considering (see *Nature* 386, 636; 1997).

Other proposals include withdrawing from the Vienna-based International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, and reducing the national fusion research programme. In addition, national polar and space research, as well as some small research grant programmes, should receive less money, says the committee, as alternative funds are now available.

According to Torbjörn Fagerström, a professor of theoretical ecology at the University of Lund, and the committee's general secretary, EMBL was singled out as a means of making savings on European scientific activities because Sweden has a strong base in cellular and molecular

biology, and is therefore less reliant on international collaboration. The report is now being considered by Carl Tham, the minister of education and research who will make a proposal to parliament next month.

WHO and Unesco link hands on malaria

[PARIS] **The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) have agreed to cooperate in promoting education about malaria. The organizations believe that improved education — for example, on personal protection measures, and early diagnosis and treatment — could have an impact on the prevalence of malaria, which affects 300 million to 500 million people annually and kills 1.5 million to 2.7 million (see *Nature* 386, 535; 1997). The two bodies will cooperate in the development of educational materials and media packs, and the training of teachers.**

Study will investigate Gulf War illness

[LONDON] Britain's new armed forces minister, John Reid, has promised to take urgent action on illnesses suffered by Gulf War veterans. In a policy statement issued on 11 May, Reid announced that the

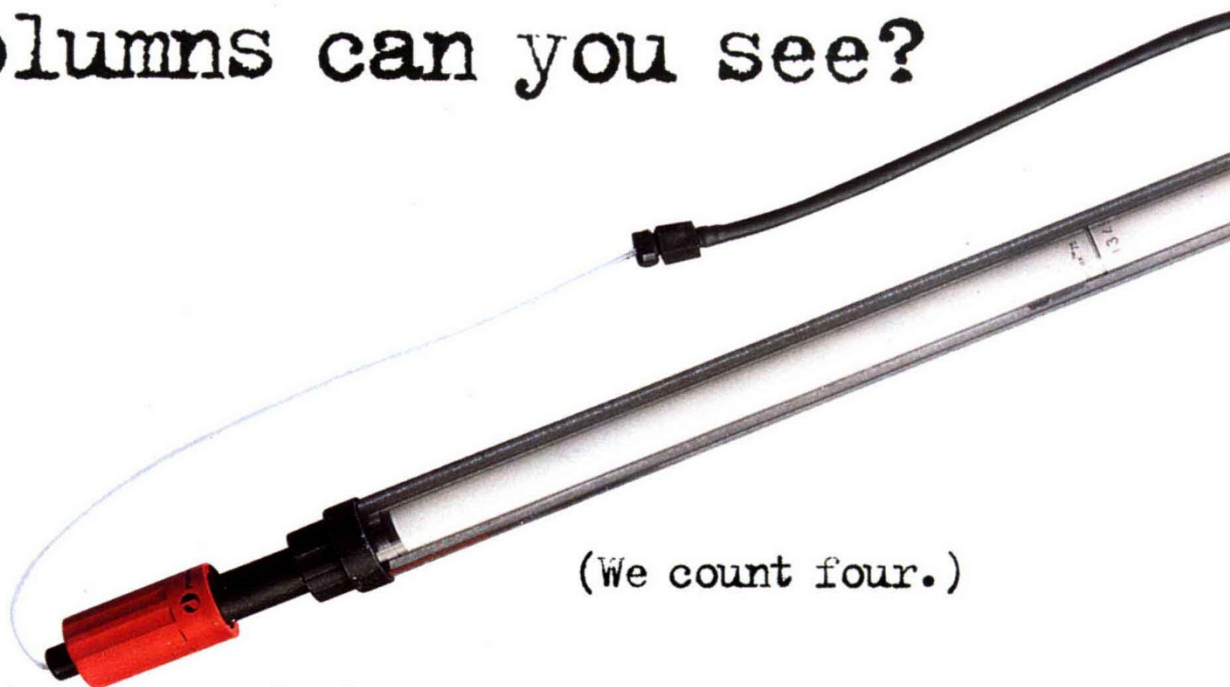
government is to launch a research project to investigate the causes of a range of illnesses collectively known as 'Gulf War syndrome'. This will be separate from the £3-million (US\$4.8 million) epidemiological study commissioned by the previous Conservative government last November on the advice of the Medical Research Council (see *Nature* 384, 604; 1996). It will investigate the effects of vaccines and anti-nerve gas drugs given to service personnel to counter biological and chemical weapons.

Brussels beefs up its food advisory process

[PARIS] **The European Commission has adopted details of a comprehensive overhaul of its food policy and system of scientific advisory committees, prompted by the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis. The commission says that "excellence, independence and transparency" will now be the three principles guiding its gathering of scientific advice. To that end, it intends to recruit "eminent" scientists, who must have no possible conflicts of interest in their role as advisers.**

Emma Bonino's directorate for consumer policy and health protection (DG24) is to be reinforced with 273 extra staff through redeployment of staff from other directorates, and recruitment. Her

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columns can you see?



(We count four.)

directorates now regroup all the commission's advisory committees, previously spread throughout the commission. Their work will be overseen by a new scientific steering committee.

Food standard agency meets Labour's promise

[LONDON] Tony Blair, the new British prime minister, has promised to press ahead with proposals to set up a food standards agency independent of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and reporting to the Department of Health. The proposals are outlined in a report by Philip James, director of the Rowett Research Institute at the University of Aberdeen.

The report was commissioned by Blair in March as part of his party's proposals to rectify the loss of public confidence in British food policy. The report says the agency should be managed by a 10-member commission dominated by "public and consumer interests". It also calls for government advisory committees to meet in public.

Ireland 'still lacks a credible science base'

[MUNICH] The Royal Irish Academy has criticized Ireland's first white paper (policy document) on science, technology and

innovation for failing to put forward a "coherent strategy for improving Ireland's research and development strategy and its climate for research". In its formal response to the white paper, the academy criticizes the document's failure to address the chronic underfunding of basic research, saying that Ireland is left "well short of what it needs for a credible national research programme". The importance of basic research had been stressed in the 1995 report of the government's Science, Technology and Innovation Advisory Council.

Russian science wins concessions on tax

[MOSCOW] Russia's science ministry has emerged victorious after a bruising encounter with the finance ministry over plans to levy tax on grants to research institutions. Under the new tax code, research grants are to remain tax-exempt.

Some Russian scientists remain displeased, however, as tax-exempt status will be refused to institutions that get more than 30 per cent of their funds from non-government sources. "The new tax code [is] the last nail in the Russian science coffin," says Gennady Mesyats, vice-president of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Mesyats is also concerned that a new property tax, and a 20 per cent indirect tax

on sales of research products or services, will penalize the more successful institutions. The new tax code has been presented to the Russian parliament. If signed into law, it will remain in force until January 1999.

Placebo use defended in Third World studies

[WASHINGTON] US biomedical leaders last week defended the use of placebos in trials of the anti-AIDS drug AZT in pregnant women in Africa and Asia. Harold Varmus, the director of the National Institutes of Health, and David Satcher, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told a House of Representatives subcommittee that the trials, in countries including the Ivory Coast and Thailand, are scientifically and ethically justified.

Christopher Shays, the chairman of the subcommittee on human resources of the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, challenged trials with placebos overseas when long-course AZT has been proved effective in reducing perinatal AIDS transmission in developed countries. Satcher said that "the international community has never accepted the [long-course regimen] as appropriate for developing countries", and that studies with placebos were necessary to determine the value of short-course AZT in those countries.

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