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Row over neutron source hots up as Germany's advisers cry foul

Quirin Schiermeier, Munich

When Germany's science council, the Wissenschaftsrat, declined to recommend a major new neutron source for funding, it said it was acting on the advice of an international committee of physicists. Now members of that expert group claim that their views were distorted, and that the group's chairman inserted remarks critical of the neutron project without their blessing.

The council decided on 12 July that German designs for the European Spallation Source (ESS), a 1.4-billion-euro (US\$1.4-billion) neutron facility that will be used to probe molecular structures, did not deserve funding. The move was based on a report by a 15-member panel chaired by Hans Spiess, a director at the Max Planck Institute for Polymer Research in Mainz. The council concluded that alternative and cheaper technologies were likely to become available by 2011, the earliest time at which the ESS could become operational (see *Nature* 418, 262; 2002).

But on 19 July, seven members of the group wrote to the council's president, Karl Max Einhäupl, claiming that the report "reflected neither the consensus view of the subcommittee nor the opinion of most

members" (see *Nature* 418, 367; 2002). Einhäupl has since said that the group was given three weeks to comment and amend the report in April, and that all but one endorsed it (see Correspondence, page 479). But panel members say that Spiess did not include their comments in the final report.

"The final draft of our report, which I received four days before it was adopted, bore no resemblance to what we had discussed," says Thomas Mason, director of the Spallation Neutron Source currently under construction at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. "There was also no indication of a deadline for making objections, and by the time I sent a note describing my concerns it was already too late."

Other signatories of the letter report similar experiences. "The final draft of our report included critical remarks about the ESS that we had never discussed," says Erich Sackmann, a biophysicist at the Technical University of Munich. "Then suddenly everything went very quickly, and the report was endorsed without further discussion, not to mention a final meeting or vote."

Sackmann and Mason allege that addi-



Model idea: but the report concluded that cheaper alternatives to the source were imminent.

tions to the report, concluding that developments in nuclear-magnetic-resonance imaging and synchrotron technology were likely to replace neutrons, and that a 'neutron drought' alone did not justify major investment in a new facility, were made by Spiess.

Spiess, who has previously criticized the neutron community for its narrow scientific horizons, emphatically rejects having weakened the case for the ESS in the report. "After we disseminated the report in April we received very positive comments," he says, adding that only one person objected. ■

► www.wissenschaftsrat.de/texte/5373-02.pdf

Accused obesity researcher returns to the French fold

Declan Butler, Paris

Bernard Bihain, the obesity researcher who left French research in 1998 amid allegations of scientific misconduct, is to take up a post with his former employers INSERM, France's national biomedical research agency.

Bihain's claim to have identified and cloned a molecule involved in fat degradation was queried in 1997 by members of his lab at the University of Rennes 1. An internal inquiry commissioned by the French research ministry concluded that the testimony of seven of the whistleblowers raised doubts about certain results produced by the lab. But no action was taken, and plans for a second, international inquiry were shelved after Bihain closed his

lab in August 1998 (see *Nature* 395, 829; 1998).

After working in the United States for the French biotech company Genset and subsequently for ValiGen, a genomics firm, Bihain returned to France and applied for a new position at INSERM. He is expected to work at the agency's centre for clinical investigation in Nancy, leading a group researching into anti-obesity drugs.

Christian Brechot, director-general of



Bernard Bihain is set to take up a new post in Nancy.

INSERM, says that Bihain is entitled to a permanent INSERM post under French law. He argues that his decision to hire Bihain was based on the researcher's overall scientific record and that the misconduct allegations are a separate issue for the science ministry. But he says he did ask an international team of experts to review a report commissioned from Bihain detailing his past research and future plans. "The opinion was that although some of his hypotheses have not been confirmed, his contribution was of value," Brechot says.

Bihain, who always denied the allegations, says the charges have never been proved. "I would like to be shown one published scientific fact that is false," he says. ■