

USA

● The International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) is the latest organisation to seek a role for itself in the mounting debate over the risks and benefits associated with recombinant DNA experiments. At its 16th General Assembly, held in Washington last week, ICSU decided to establish a Committee on Genetic Experimentation to undertake a variety of tasks, ranging from the provision of advice and information to anyone who seeks it, to the support of lectures and training courses on safety techniques. The committee will also look into the possibility of providing ICSU support for a facility where large populations of cloned fragments of, for example, mouse or human DNA will be constructed and maintained for use by individual scientists. One aim of the committee is to use ICSU's considerable influence to try to ensure that the various controls on recombinant DNA experiments which are being imposed by countries around the world are consistent with each other. As Sir John Kendrew, ICSU's secretary general put it last week, it doesn't make much sense for one country to put very strict controls on the research and for another to allow experiments to go ahead with few restrictions.

But Kendrew acknowledged that the countries with which ICSU deals "are sovereign states and you can't tell them what to do". The committee (which has the snappy acronym COGENE) will thus work behind the scenes, collecting and distributing information and providing assistance to national committees where it can.

Part of COGENE's task will be to ensure that recombinant DNA experiments are allowed to proceed, albeit under "appropriate and generally agreed safeguards". Dr William J. Whelan, who headed a committee which wrote COGENE's charter, noted last week, for example, that "the committee is not coming into being to preside over the demise of genetic manipulation and to that extent, ICSU is expressing a position".

The committee's most valuable function, however, may well be its provision of training courses and other technical assistance for recombinant DNA researchers. Kendrew pointed out that in smaller countries training in biological safety techniques may be limited, and ICSU could provide a needed service. The committee will also look into ways to aid in the distribution of strains of crippled hosts and vectors for recom-

binant DNA work, to help ensure that such strains are universally available.

As for the suggestion that COGENE should provide assistance for a central clone bank for fragments of mammalian DNA, the establishment of such a facility could greatly reduce the proliferation of some of the more hazardous cloning experiments. A similar clone bank is under con-



sideration in the United States, for use by American scientists.

● Once again, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has refused to allow the artificial sweetener cyclamate back on the market in the United States because of unanswered questions about its safety. Cyclamates were banned by FDA in 1969 on the basis of studies which indicated that they may cause bladder cancer in test animals when fed to them in large quantities; Abbott Laboratories, the manufacturer of the sweetener, contested the ruling and has been trying ever since to get it reversed. Last year, Abbott presented FDA with a petition, backed by a sheaf of test data, purporting to show that cyclamates are safe. But, last week, after turning Abbott's evidence over to an independent committee for its opinion, FDA rejected the petition, stating that "the data submitted . . . do not establish that cyclamate acid, calcium cyclamate, and sodium cyclamate are safe for their intended use". Undeterred, Abbott has demanded a public hearing, and will probably press its case in court if necessary. The final curtain has still not dropped on the longest-running food additive farce in Washington.

● The Presidential election campaign drones on, with scarcely any mention of scientific, environmental or related issues (the only exception being some discussion of ways to curb nuclear proliferation). But at least the candidates' thoughts on three matters of interest to the scientific community

have appeared in print.

The current issue of *Physics Today*, a magazine published by the American Physics Society, contains the responses of President Ford and Jimmy Carter to three questions put to them by the APS president, William Fowler. Fowler asked for their views on the role of science advisers in the White House, on national energy needs and the nuclear power programme, and on federal support for basic and applied science.

On the role of scientists in White House policy-making, Ford referred to the fact that Congress has recently approved legislation he introduced to re-establish a White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). Noting that the director of the office will be the President's science adviser, Ford stated that he would "be one of my senior advisers and will also provide advice to other senior advisers". Carter offered no details of the role of his science adviser, though he argued that "the office of science adviser to the President should be upgraded immediately to provide a permanent and high-level relationship between the White House and the scientific community".

The two candidates differed most in their replies on energy policy. Ford contended that the use of both coal and nuclear power should be expanded. called the safety record of nuclear plants "outstanding", said he had increased federal spending on safety technology, and noted that his Administration was then in the middle of a review of its nuclear policy.

Carter said that no leadership now existed in the White House on energy planning. He said strong emphasis should be placed on energy conservation, arguing that "50% of our energy is wasted". On nuclear power, Carter stated that "we must make every effort to minimise our dependence on nuclear energy", though he emphasised that he does not support a nuclear moratorium. He said he would shift research priorities from nuclear power to conservation and non-nuclear options.

On federal research support, Ford said he had increased budgets for basic research and criticised Congress for reducing his budget proposals for the National Science Foundation. Carter noted that the federal government "has a crucial role to play in supporting development of new technologies which address national priorities".

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