

IN BRIEF

Threat to Polish physicist

Miroslaw Chojecki, a Polish physicist and active participant in the unofficial Workers' Defence Committee, has been threatened with arrest. Chojecki, who was dismissed last December from the Nuclear Research Institute at Swierk, has been collecting materials on alleged police brutality and abuses of power in connection with the Radom and Ursus disturbances last June. On 12 February, he sent a memorandum to the Sejm (Parliament), to the Council of State, and to leading journals demanding that the Sejm should appoint a committee to investigate these abuses. Three hours later he was called to the office of the Chief Prosecutor and told that unless he withdrew the memorandum he would be charged and arrested.

The Workers' Defence Committee, set up last September, includes a num-

ber of scientists. Among the many recent letters of protest sent to the Sejm, one is from 13 scientists, another by 170 intellectuals, including some 30 scientists, and a third is from 28 professors, 14 of whom are either members of the Polish Academy of Sciences or else working at Institutes of the Academy.

Science adviser tipped

More than three weeks after President Carter's inauguration, vacancies still abound in the federal science agencies, and the most important post, the president's science adviser and head of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, was the only top White House job unfilled by the end of last week. There have, however, been some recent signs of movement. Several candidates were said to be under serious consideration for the science adviser's

post last week, and the leading contender was rumoured to be Frank Press, head of the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at MIT.

Well regarded in science policy circles, Press was a member of the president's science advisory committee and a delegate to the test ban talks in the early 1960s. He is now a member of the national science board and chairman on the National Academy of Sciences' Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China. Though White House sources cautioned last Friday that Press's appointment was not cut and dried, an indication of high level interest is the fact that Press met with Carter for about half-an-hour last week.

Minister's vaccine statement

Ten days after an announcement that the UK Health Service Commissioner

"BUGS by the bushel" read the headline to an item in the latest issue of the Pharmaceutical Society's journal, referring to an advertisement that appeared in *Nature* late last year. The advertisement itself, placed by the Ministry of Defence's Microbiological Research Establishment at Porton Down, was headlined "Bacteria by the Kilogram" (November 11, 1976—Cover 3). The journal had expressed concern that terrorists might acquire dangerous bugs.

A London evening newspaper picked the story up and ran it on the front page. The national dailies, ranging from the *Times* to the *Daily Mirror*, gave it prominence the following day, the *Times* on its front page. A spokesman from the Pharmaceutical Society was quoted as saying that all the bacteria named in the advertisement were very dangerous toxins, no less.

An MP who found the matter "outrageous" arranged to ask a question in the House of Commons about the offer. A junior minister, Mr John Gilbert, duly reported the same day that the sale of bacteria for civil research requirements was not a new departure for the MRE, though the offer by means of advertising was. And the storm seemed to pass.

What was the fuss about? The Pharmaceutical Society journal article focuses strongly on the implications of a particular section of the advertisement. Three words, in fact, saying that the MRE can supply the products advertised "to any destination". This does look worrying when the products include "toxic proteins" and "animal viruses", and when the MRE

says, "We also grow new strains for research workers—if you have a requirement please ask if we can help". Small wonder, it seems, that others should latch on to the journal's worry about terrorists.

Mr Gilbert did have some comforting words in the Commons, however.

Hard selling bugs



BACKGROUNDER

The bacteria weren't dangerous pathogens. They were sold solely for research. And the phrase "to any destination" was there, he said—this, the catch-all British legitimation—to make it clear that export inquiries were welcomed.

Mr Gilbert also assured the Commons that the only bacterial species mentioned which could be conceivably harmful to humans were sup-

plied only to bona fide customers at recognised laboratories or research institutes. They were dispatched in full conformity with international regulations.

The harmless species advertised included *E. coli*, found in the human gut, and *B. stearothermophilus* and *T. equatica*, which are soil and water bacteria that do not infect man or animals. Researchers need bacteria in large quantities for the extraction of even small amounts of various microbial proteins. The MRE has the time, expertise and facilities to grow them.

Indeed, the MRE has recently expanded its Microbial Research Products Division to meet the growing demand for a wide variety of microbial products, in particular the restriction endonucleases — enzymes which snip DNA at precisely specified sites and which are now essential tools for recombinant DNA work and to generate DNA fragments for cloning. The MRE also has a contract service for researchers needing large quantities of particular bacteria.

What makes the latest development newsworthy is, as Mr Gilbert implied, the *Nature* advertisement. The Ministry of Defence decided last year that it will no longer meet the cost of providing facilities and staff at the MRE for the non-military work it does (military-related work is being transferred to the nearby Chemical Defence Establishment). That means researchers in microbiology in Britain stand to see the only facility of its type go to seed unless it can stand on its feet outside the Ministry of Defence. So to drum up business, the MRE has started advertising.