

## news in brief

**Birmingham University smallpox case starts:** Legal action against Birmingham University under Section 2 of the UK 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act began this week in Birmingham. The university is being prosecuted by the Health and Safety Executive for failing in its obligation to "ensure as far as reasonably practical" safe working conditions in the east wing of the University Hospital. The release of smallpox pathogens from a P3 containment facility late in 1978 resulted in the death of a laboratory worker and closure of the facility. Under the terms of the act, the university could face a maximum fine of £1,000.

UK experts in occupational health regard the case as an important precedent that goes beyond the guilt or innocence of the university. It is the first prosecution brought against a university since the act was passed in 1974. Sheila McKechnie, health and safety officer of the Association of Scientific, Technical, and Managerial Staffs, said the case had given impetus to the campaign for laboratory safety. "The universities have been hiding behind a lot of 'frontiers of science' rubbish. They have been arrogant and have refused to acknowledge their obligations under the 1974 Act. The smallpox case has raised everyone's awareness of the extent of health hazards involved in university research", she said.

**US studies identify formaldehyde as carcinogenic:** Laboratory rats exposed to formaldehyde vapour have been shown to develop nasal cancer, according to tests submitted to the Consumer Product Safety Commission by the Formaldehyde Institute recently. A spokesman for the institute said that in the course of a two-year study, four rats out of a total of 720 tested developed tumours visible to the naked eye after 16 months, three after exposure to formaldehyde exposure at levels of 15 parts per million, and one at a dose level of six parts per million. Under existing standards promulgated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, worker exposure must be kept below three parts per million over an eight-hour period, or an average of five parts per million over 15 minutes. Mr John Clary, chairman of the institute's medical committee and a toxicologist with Celanese Corporation, said that the results were "significant".

**ARMS to lobby parliament:** ARMS, the Association for Researchers in Medical Science, are holding a day of parliamentary activity on 6 November. Members and supporters will assemble outside the Department of Education and Science to present a petition to the Secretary of State for Education and Science demanding "immediate action to implement a proper career structure for research scientists in biomedical research in UK universities and medical schools". A meeting is then planned with a number of MPs to discuss the position of medical researchers in the UK. An ARMS spokesman called the action "perhaps the last chance for researchers on short term contracts to discuss with MPs what is wrong with the current system of funding in the UK".

**Chinese Minister of Education in whirlwind tour of UK:** Mr Jiang Nanxiang, Minister of Education of the People's Republic of China, visited the UK from 28 September to 7 October to discuss scientific exchanges and to see British educational institutions. Mr Jiang, who had been relieved of his duties as principal of Peking University during the Cultural Revolution, was appointed Minister of Education earlier this year. He is said to be a believer in "quality education". The one-week tour consisted of visits to 18 UK educational and scientific institutions including middle schools, polytechnics and the Clarendon and Cavendish laboratories at Oxford and Cambridge. The Chinese delegation expressed particular interest in the Open University and its sophisticated system of correspondence courses, television programmes and regional tutorial centres. According to an OU

spokesperson, the minister expressed interest in the regional centres, home experiment kits, and asked whether OU degrees were useful for "advancement and promotion". The university is designed to make university education more readily available to people from working class backgrounds but the Chinese minister expressed "little interest" in this aspect of the university's work, an OU official said.

**India achieves breakthrough in fish culture:** India's fish production may be revolutionised by a new composite fish culture technique developed by the Central Inland Fisheries Institute, (CIFRI), Barrackpore, West Bengal. The new culture technique uses a compatible fish combination of indigenous major carps and fast growing carps, and scientists testing this found yields as high as 6,500 kg fish per hectare per annum could be produced in some regions, although the project target had been only 3,000 kg fish per hectare per annum. This culture can be integrated with pig and duck culture, reducing the operational costs and producing 4,500 kg fish per hectare per annum and 1,800 duck eggs. Pig and duck excreta supply nutrients to the water, maintaining a high level of production. CIFRI's director, Dr V G Jhingran, estimates that if all India's present culturable waters are put to composite fish culture, average fish production will rise from 600 to 3,000 kg fish per hectare per annum. — Zaka Imam, New Delhi

**Most blindness can be prevented:** A meeting of an international group of experts on blindness has produced a report claiming that the incidence of blindness in the world can be halved quickly by simple and effective preventive measures. According to the report, most of the estimated 30-40 million cases of blindness are due to infection, malnutrition and cataracts. Visual impairment is 10-40 times more prevalent in certain areas of developing countries than in industrialised countries. The main obstacles to initiating a prevention campaign are a lack of national commitment, inadequate administrative infrastructure and a lack of money. The report also urges an avoidance of "the misunderstanding that equates the prevention of blindness with the availability of ophthalmologists". The meeting was sponsored by the F.I. Proctor Foundation in San Francisco, The International Eye Foundation, and the World Health Organisation. *Guidelines for Programmes for the Prevention of Blindness.* World Health Organisation, Geneva, 1979. 47pp. Sw Fr 10.

**IAEA reports 50% increase in new nuclear plants:** The International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, in its annual survey of nuclear energy, reports that 15,000MW of new nuclear plants were installed in 1978 compared to 10,000MW installed in 1977. Nuclear power now accounts for 110,000MW or 5.8% of the world's total electrical generating capacity with 227 nuclear power stations operating in 21 of the agency's member states. The agency defends the safety record of nuclear power, citing "twenty years of commercial nuclear power generation without a single radiation-induced death or a serious radiation induced injury at any nuclear power plant".

**EEC to spend £70 million on energy research:** The Council of the European Communities is to spend about £70 million on a second four-year programme into energy research and development. The money will be allocated on the basis of shared-cost contracts over the four-year period 1979-83. Research organisations, industrial companies and universities will be eligible to apply and the first formal call for applications has been made by the EEC. Applications will be screened by an advisory committee which will make recommendations to the commission. The breakdown of the allocation is: solar energy, £30.7m; energy conservation, £18m; geothermal energy, £12m; hydrogen energy production, £5.3m; and energy strategy studies, £4m.