

## news in brief

**Research funds sought for Three Mile Island clean-up:**

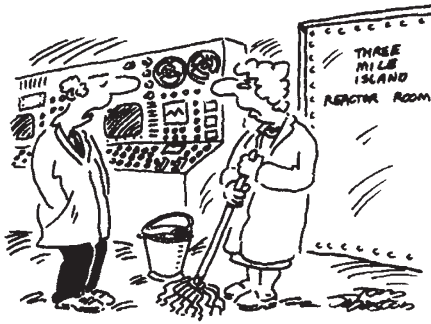
The owners of Three Mile Island nuclear plant said last week that they were negotiating with the Department of Energy over possible federal support for the Clean-up following last March's accident

as a research project, on the grounds that the work will be "a covenant way of learning more about reactor safety". Mr Herman Dieckamp, President of the General Public Utilities Corporation, told a Senate Committee that the DOE was planning to fund research that could be conducted either at the TMI plant; or on materials from the site for which the government would pay the utility company access fees and materials costs. Typical research projects might include the development of decontamination methods, studies of hot core behaviour and removal and experimental work on damaged fuel pellets. "This is an important opportunity to add to the nation's nuclear expertise", Mr Dieckamp said.

**AAAS executive foresees greater state direction over science:** "I suspect strongly that the 1980s will see the main directions of science and technology decided by government" Mr William Carey, Executive Officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said in Washington last week. Addressing the annual conference of the Society for Social Study of Science, Mr Carey said that the US was already far down that road, since the federal government paid more than half of the national bill for research and development, and influenced the rest through regulatory, tax and fiscal policy. "The illusion of partnership between government and academic science remains a lovely but abstract image, but it is not (if it ever was) an equal partnership". Domestic and international problems meant that this relationship would be "tortured progressively in the coming years". There was likely to be a rapidly growing social preference for centralised government, at the expense of pluralism and checks and balances. And one of the great tests would be that of holding on to such negotiating authority as science still possessed in its bargain with society.

**Birmingham University not guilty in smallpox case:** Birmingham University was found not guilty last week of health and safety violations arising out of the smallpox outbreak last year that killed Mrs Janet Parker, a university photographer. Parker was working on the floor of the pathogen laboratory of Professor Henry Bedson and the prosecution alleged that Parker caught the disease from airborne particles carried through a faulty ventilation system. Witnesses for the university rejected the argument saying that they were unable to assign a cause to Parker's death other than "personal contact". The UK Health and Safety Executive who brought the suit called the result "disappointing". The HSE is considering an appeal.

**UK medical researchers lobby parliament:** British politicians who met with representatives from the Association of Researchers in Medical Science on 8 November said that while they sympathised with the problems of short term contract workers they "were not sure that it was a matter for government". One hundred representatives of research workers in the UK marched to the House of Commons after presenting a petition with 1300



"Remember to keep the computer informed every time you wring out your mop!"

signatures to Mr Mark Carlisle, the Minister for Education and Science. A succession of MPs were "amazed" that they had "never heard of this before" but they wanted explanations about the particular situation of researchers compared to other groups in difficulty, why the trade unions weren't involved and they told the representatives that "researchers need to be very much clearer about they want to do". One MP offered to meet with ARMS and the Medical Research Council but when questioned about the efficacy of such a move said that he "wouldn't want to get into a confrontation with the MRC". As a result of the meeting ARMS will prepare a detailed brief of its proposals for a career structure for non-medically qualified researchers by Christmas.

**Two thousand protest reorganisation of French biomedical research:**

In an open letter to the Prime Minister, 2000 French biomedical researchers have opposed "with profound emotion" the new governmental directives on scientific employment — particularly in INSERM, the national institute of health and medical research. Three hundred researchers demonstrated outside INSERM on 6 November for the meeting of its Administrative Council. According to *Le Monde* the signatories include 195 university professors and hospital doctors, 205 directors of research (including 89 INSERM unit directors), 81 heads of hospital services, 13 presidents of teaching and research establishments, 4 professors of the College de France and "one Nobel laureate". The principle points of contention in the new directives are the age limit on recruitment (27 years for researchers, 30 for doctors), a "forced mobility" plan which would give the government the power to assign researchers to any laboratory and new restrictions on promotion when researchers are needed on "priority projects".

**Space Shuttle faces further delays — and legal probe:** Nothing seems to be going right for the Space Shuttle, which the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration plans to have flying by the middle of next year. Last week another engine was severely damaged during testing at NASA's National Space Technology Laboratories in Bay St Louis, Missouri. No official statement of the impact on the Shuttle programme has been made, but it could delay the first launch, already a year behind schedule, by a further two to three months.

On top of this, the US Department of Justice announced last week that it was investigating charges that Rockwell International, the main contractor for the Space Shuttle, had hidden cost overruns on development aspects of the programme in later production budgets — and that this may have contributed to the delay in the cost-overruns now estimated at 20% above the initial estimate of \$5.15 billion.

**US Congress approves \$20,000 million programme to develop synthetic fuels:**

President Carter won a major victory for his energy proposals last week when the US Senate approved administration-backed legislation to spend \$20,000 million on the development of synthetic fuels over the next five years. The Senate also approved expenditure of a further \$14,000 million for conservation measures and the use of solar energy and gasohol — including a commitment to speed the development of fuels from agricultural and forest products, a move enthusiastically supported by the US farming community. The Bill approved by the Senate, which has been sent to the White House for signature following the passage of a similar measure in the House of Representatives last Friday, sets a target goal of 1.5 million barrels of oil equivalent of synthetic fuels a day by 1995. President Carter had initially proposed spending \$88,000 million on synthetic fuel development over the five years, but subsequently gave his support to the reduced programme. Included in the programme is an Energy Security Corporation which could build three government owned synthetic fuel plants.