

news in brief

Dioxin traces found in soldiers exposed to defoliant: Research workers at the Veteran's Administration in Washington announced last week that tests had revealed the presence of small amounts of dioxin in fat tissues taken from men who were exposed to the defoliant 2,4,5-T during the Vietnam war. Dr Lyndon E Lee told a public meeting of the VA's Advisory Committee on Health-related Effects of Herbicides that analysis had revealed traces of dioxin ranging from three to 57 parts per trillion in fat tissue taken from 33 individuals, including a control group of 10 who had not served in Vietnam. However he added that the amounts of dioxin, a highly toxic contaminant, were so small that it was impossible to attach any significance to them.

Meanwhile President Carter has announced the setting up of an interagency working group to study the long-term health effects of exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides which were used extensively during the Vietnam war, and which many veterans are now claiming responsible for complaints ranging from liver disorders to chromosomal damage. According to the White House the working group will have the major responsibility for making public the results and implications of research on the health effects of phenoxy herbicides and their contaminants.

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine fears closure: London University's School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine may close if the government's proposed increase in fees to foreign students goes ahead. The school now charges overseas students £1200 per year which would have to increase to £5000 next year and to £7000 by 1982-1983 if the government goes ahead with its plan. Of the school's 249 full time students and 1023 part time students 58% are from overseas from a total of 85 countries. The school is a postgraduate institution offering MPhil, MSc and PhD degrees and is known for research and teaching in tropical diseases as well as community medicine, occupational medicine and epidemiology and statistics. Gordon Smith, dean of the school, said that the probable loss of overseas students was not just a question of money. "Our students are a resource of considerable magnitude. They are experienced and knowledgeable and the school's research programmes could not function without them." Smith also stressed that since the Soviet Union was the only other country offering research and training in tropical medicine at a "reasonable fee" that a policy directed against overseas students might have "undesirable foreign policy implications".

Other internationally known schools of London University threatened by closure because of the proposed increases include the School of Oriental and African Studies with 35% overseas students and the London School of Economics with 37% overseas students.

ASTMS calls for MRC tenure reforms: The Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs is discussing proposals for extensive reforms in the UK Medical Research Council's tenure procedures. A working paper circulating to ASTMS/MRC national advisory committee affirms ASTMS general policy that "potential dismissal, including the end of fixed term contracts, should be the subject of negotiation and not be solely at the employer's discretion". The proposals call for changes in both new appointments and tenure procedures. Present non-renewable three year appointments would be replaced by three year fellowships with a one year renewable option, a retirement contribution, no age limit, no waiver clause and would end with a "substantial cash gratuity if the fellow is not taken on to permanent staff". The proposed tenure procedures for scientific staff would replace the present five year scheme with a one year probationary period followed by a tenure decision. The tenure decision would be made with the candidate having full access to submitted reports and in the case of denial reasons would have to be given.

UK National Physical Laboratory Chemical Division to close: A 4% cut in the budget of the National Physical Laboratory is to be applied solely to the division of Chemical Standards. Chemists in the division were told that a decision had been "made centrally" to close two sections in the division because "the jam had become too thin to spread further". The two sections, Reference Materials and Thermodynamic and Phase Equilibria Data, employ two thirds of the Division's 60 scientists and the entire division will close as a result. The scientific staff has been given two years and three months to find other jobs. It is not clear whether the NPL will employ them since the Chemical Standards Division is the only one devoted to chemistry at the NPL.

UK energy report calls for development of fast breeders: A major Department of Energy report on energy technologies for the UK regards the fast breeder reactor as the only economic solution to Britain's electricity needs over the next fifty years. On the basis of the assumptions made in the report it is estimated that it will ultimately be economic to install nuclear power to generate between 80% and 90% of public electricity supply. The fast breeder is seen to be the likely solution for the ensuing world-wide competition for uranium. The report says "Only by introducing the fast reactor on a large scale by the early decades of the next century can the world demand for uranium be brought within credible bounds". Fusion power is seen to be unrealistic and alternative sources of energy are regarded only as insurance against shortages. *Energy Technology for the UK* Vol 1 (£3.00) Vol 2 (£5.75). HMSO.

UK to provide free science consultancies for industry: A scheme to facilitate "industrial exploitation of innovations originating in research" has been approved by the Science Research Council and the Royal Society. The two bodies will provide £100,000 a year for ten fellowships to enable academic scientists to "work directly in the productive process" and for industrial scientists to learn new basic research techniques. The scheme is expected to be effective in "growth technology areas" in which there is "quite a distinct demand on the industrial side". Although the scheme is intended to be "flexible" genetic manipulation techniques are expected to be in high demand in industry circles.

BSSRS calls for new safety procedures for hospital radiation hazards: The British Society for Social Responsibility in Science Hospital Hazards Group has issued a report calling for new radiation limits and redundancy agreements for hospital workers exposed to radiation. The report suggests that trade unions should negotiate local limits at each hospital that are substantially lower than established upper limits since "all research indicates that the majority of exposure can easily be kept at 1/10 of the current limits".

The report also calls for trade unions to negotiate lay-off agreements whereby workers who receive their maximum allowable yearly dose of 5 rem are transferred to new jobs without loss of pay or seniority. In addition the report recommends that protective safety clothing be a measure of "last resort". Substitution (e.g. ultra sound for x-rays) and containment or shielding are seen to be superior safety measures. *Radiation Hazards in Hospitals*. British Society for Social Responsibility in Science, 9 Poland St, London W1. 18p.

Correction: In the correspondence "Fast reactors will be problematical and expensive" (22 November, page 358) there was an error in the fourth sentence of the second column. It should have read "... spokesmen for the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate stated "we have indicated the seriousness with which the NII views the possibility of whole-core accidents in fast reactors. The consequences are potentially worse than for major accidents in a thermal reactor system ...".