

stringency earned him the nickname "Cap the Knife". He was later promoted to Secretary of the then-named Department of Health, Education and Welfare at a period when biomedical research was becoming dominated by a congressional "disease of the month" approach.

Various names are being discussed for the position of Under-Secretary of Defense for Research and Technology, responsible for the Pentagon's massive research budget. They include Mr William van Cleave, at present head of Mr Reagan's defence transition team, and Mr Benjamin T. Plymale of the Boeing Corporation, who was the source of controversy last year when his security clearance was temporarily revoked.

No clear candidate has yet emerged to head the Department of Energy. One suggestion, Mr Michel Halbouty, a Houston oilman and geologist who was Reagan's chief energy strategist during the campaign, is being opposed by some influential Republicans because of his lack of government experience. Others have opposed the nomination of Mr Frank Zarb, a top energy official in the Nixon and Ford administrations, because of his involvement in setting up the present system of price controls on crude oil and gasoline. Two possible contenders are Dr John Sununu, professor of engineering at Tufts University, Massachusetts, and Representative Clarence Brown of Ohio.

Appointments at a lower level, including the heads of independent agencies such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, are not likely to be announced until the main cabinet posts have been filled.

In the science field, these appointments will also depend on the report of the science and technology transition team under Dr Simon Ramo of TRW and Dr Art Bueche of General Electric.

Dr William A. Nierenberg, director of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, is widely mentioned as possible director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), as is Dr Guyford Stever, ex-director of the National Science Foundation, who held the OSTP job for a few months at the end of the Ford administration.

At the National Science Foundation (NSF) itself, the Reagan administration seems unlikely to overturn the appointment of Dr John Slaughter as director. Dr Slaughter was sworn in two weeks ago, and that the emphasis that he is keen to put on the development of engineering and applied research should match Republican goals for science.

Finally, the appointment of Dr Frank Press, the present director of OSTP and President Carter's Science Advisor, was assured as the next president of the National Academy of Sciences when nominations for the post closed last Monday without any other names having been put forward.

David Dickson

Soviet plans

Science on tap

Soviet science is to be geared even more closely to the needs of the economy, according to the guidelines for the 11th Five Year Plan, published last week. The plan calls for a substantial reduction in the time taken to disseminate research results, strengthening of the links between research and production, better coordination between scientific establishments and an improved basis for scientific planning.

Individual research priorities specified by the guidelines range from the immediately practical (the improvement of computer technology and software) to the long-term (creation of the bases for thermonuclear power engineering), and from the further conquest of space to greater environmental protection and economic utilization of the biosphere. Biotechnology to produce new compounds with tailor-made properties, particle physics and immunology all receive special mention.

At this stage of planning, however, no specific targets are mentioned, nor is the financing of science discussed. The emphasis on closer links between science and industry, however, and the statement that ministries and departments are to bear increased responsibility for industrial research may have some financial implications. Their responsibility will presumably also include the planning of research in institutes under their control. One of the main complaints of Soviet scientists in recent years has been the inflexibility of research plans once approved. The new guidelines, however, urge that the direction of research and development should be "determined in good time . . . and changed to meet the demands of the scientific-technological revolution".

All this, however, depends on an overall increase of labour productivity. In industry, this increase is specified as 23-25 per cent, which is to account for more than 90 per cent of the increase in output. For the scientists no such target is set, perhaps because the recent "press debate" in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* has revealed only too clearly how much scientists resent having their intellectual performance monitored.

Vera Rich

DNA guidelines

Bowing out

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) are facing a virtual revolt from local Institutional Biosafety Committees (IBCs) over whether there is still a need for strict surveillance of research using recombinant DNA techniques.

At a meeting in Washington organized by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the predominant view

of the chairpersons and representatives from more than 150 IBCs throughout the country was that the prime role of the IBCs has become largely a public relations exercise.

Few of those attending the meeting were prepared to accept that recombinant DNA research presented any greater health or environmental hazard than work with unaltered organisms not covered by the NIH guidelines.

Many complained of the amount of paperwork they are required to carry out, particularly in the light of recent revisions of the guidelines, which have shifted most of the responsibility for reviewing research protocols from the NIH's Office of Recombinant DNA Activities to the local level.

The Washington meeting had originally been called for IBC chairpersons to discuss how their committees were operating. But the main focus of the two-day meeting rapidly became whether the IBCs — or even specific regulations covering recombinant DNA research — were any longer needed in their present form.

According to one NIH official, the mood of the meeting was that the amount of time that IBCs put into DNA issues was out of proportion to all sorts of other bio-hazards.

One recommendation being forwarded to next month's meeting of the NIH's Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee is that all experiments using the disabled K12 strain of the bacterium *Escherichia coli*, or the yeast *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, as host-vector systems should be totally exempt from the guidelines.

In the case of *E. coli*, the same suggestion was made last year, but the advisory committee then recommended — and NIH director Dr Donald Fredrickson agreed — that although prior approval was no longer necessary for such experiments, the requirement that the experiments be carried out under P1 physical containment conditions should remain.

Members of biosafety committees also complained about the additional paperwork resulting from NIH's requirement that, although details of all approved experiments no longer have to be registered, they must keep detailed records of all recombinant DNA work carried out in their institutions.

The latter requirement was partly the result of a survey at Stanford University in California which showed a discrepancy between the rate at which different committees required experiments to be reclassified, possibly indicating that some were interpreting the guidelines more strictly than others.

But the IBC members balked at yet more paperwork.

A straw vote taken during the final plenary session of the meeting revealed little support for the proposal that NIH should keep a record of all recombinant DNA research carried out under the guide-