

# Making private interests public

## California may ask academics to declare all

### Washington

Under new regulations proposed by the state's Fair Political Practices Committee (FPPC), research scientists at the University of California will no longer be given a blanket exemption from conflict-of-interest regulations covering other state employees.

Until now, scientists have argued that academic freedom protects them from being required to disclose their personal stake in outside companies with which they may be involved. These ground-rules are now being shifted, largely as the result of several well-publicized cases in which faculty members have profited substantially from such linkages.

Last month, at a meeting in Sacramento, the state capital, the members of FPPC voted by three votes to two to require that any scientist who accepts a research contract from a private corporation must declare to the university whether he or she has a financial interest in that corporation.

The University of California had previously volunteered to introduce an internal system requiring scientists to report potential conflicts of interest to their heads of department. The regulations being proposed by FPPC would not only formalize this arrangement, giving the state the authority to check that such reporting is being carried out, but would also require the university to set up internal review panels at each campus to which conflict-of-interest problems would be referred.

The commission's proposal has been published for public comment before its formal adoption, expected early next month. It does not go as far as some of the university's critics would have liked; in particular, a legal aid group known as California Rural Legal Assistance, which has been leading a campaign against research into labour-saving agricultural machinery at the university's Davis campus, had petitioned the commission to require research scientists to declare all their interests in outside corporations.

In their present form, the regulations would permit a scientist to keep confidential his or her stakes in a private company interested in the same area of research if the research were funded by a public agency. The regulations would therefore be more liberal than the full disclosure required of other state officials.

However, if the regulations are approved — and are subsequently accepted by the state's Office of Administrative Law — it would mean that faculty members on all nine campuses of the University of

California could no longer use academic freedom as a reason for exemption from the conflict-of-interest rules.

The law which covers the regulations was passed in the early 1970s as part of a nationwide movement to "clean up" the actions of state and federal officials in the wake of the Watergate scandals. Its main purpose is to ensure that state officials are not in a position to gain financially through links with outside contractors and other corporations in which they may have a personal interest.

Soon after the law was passed, its application to the state university was challenged by the university's board of regents on the grounds that it infringed the academic freedom of faculty members. At the time FPPC, which was set up to administer the regulations, accepted this

## Another French director resigns

Molecular biologists in France are sleeping a little less easily this week, following the spectacular resignation of one of their more important political friends, Professor Philippe Laudat, from his post as director-general of the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM).

Laudat waited until after the National Colloquium on Science and Technology (see *Nature* 21 January, p.180) before sending his letter of resignation to the Minister of Health, M. Jack Ralite, and the Minister of Science and Technology, M. Jean-Pierre Chevènement. It was against his own "personal ethics", he wrote, after working energetically for the policies of the previous government, to work now for "noticeably different policies".

The ministries appeared surprised. Laudat's resignation was neither desired nor solicited, said a spokesman for the Minister of Health. "All we did was to ask Laudat to take account of the conclusions of the National Colloquium and the regional assizes [which preceded it]."

INSERM will certainly do that now — for the new director-general will be M. Philippe Lazar, who was chief rapporteur for the colloquium. Lazar is 45, studied at the Ecole Polytechnique and is an epidemiologist interested in the social and economic aspects of health. His star rose with the new government, and his appointment may shift INSERM away from its present strong emphasis on basic biology towards the clinical and softer sciences.

The issues are complex, however. Clinical science in France is generally thought to be weak. Those who work in university hospital clinics are supposed to teach, care for patients and somehow also find time for research. The research suffers. Clinicians are sore that the last

argument and allowed an exemption.

Since then, pressure on research workers to establish closer links with the private sector has increased as both state and federal funding has decreased. The consequent growth of linkages between faculty scientists and outside corporations has been particularly noteworthy in the development and exploitation of recombinant DNA techniques and genetic engineering. Frequently, however, this has led to tensions between academic and commercial pressures.

One campus of the university is already involved in a law suit over the ownership of a cell line passed to research workers in the private sector and subsequently patented; another has told an agricultural scientist working on nitrogen fixation that he cannot both remain principal investigator

government increased INSERM's effort in molecular biology (with an eye on its application in industry) whilst neglecting sciences closer to medicine. There is thus a battle for resources within INSERM between the clinical scientists and the pure scientists, a phenomenon not unknown elsewhere.

However, the matter was complicated by Laudat's creation of international panels of experts, which doled out money for certain priority projects. These panels were outside the normal semi-democratic control of INSERM's partially-elected review committees, and inevitably they tended to favour the successful (usually basic) laboratories, to the neglect of the ailing clinical research system.

The strong French scientific trade unions have long demanded that the international committees should be advisory to, and vetted by, INSERM's elected committees — a procedure which Laudat clearly felt would destroy their effectiveness. Since the unions now have much greater leverage on the government, the fear now is that this kind of democratic reform will go ahead — with the result that INSERM resources will be spread more evenly and thinly — exactly what Laudat was trying to avoid.

But the government — and Lazar — are unlikely merely to capitulate to union pressure. Chevènement, in particular, is well aware of the ineffectiveness of many university hospital clinics, but he puts it down to inefficient structures, in particular the overbearing power of the "grands patrons", the "gerontocracy" that rules French medical laboratories and — according to some — stifles research. This view, together with the minister's determination to boost biotechnology and its base in molecular biology, may in the end refresh French biology rather than set it back.

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