

DNA panel has second thoughts

Mandatory rules not yet to be abandoned

Washington

Bending to political realities, the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC) to the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) has backed away from its support for a proposal that guidelines covering NIH-sponsored research using recombinant DNA techniques should be made voluntary, and that research institutions should no longer be formally required to establish safety committees to ensure that the guidelines are observed.

At its last meeting in September, the members of RAC decided to support the publication for public comment of the proposals for major revisions to the guidelines that would essentially transform them into a voluntary code of conduct.

However, in the light of the comments received — and in particular of warnings that if the guidelines become voluntary states such as California are likely to introduce their own more restrictive regulations — RAC on Monday adopted a compromise formula that would streamline the containment requirements for different types of experiments, but retain their mandatory aspects. Two proposals had been put out for comment. One, a revision of amendments originally proposed by Dr Alan Campbell of Stanford University and Dr David Baltimore of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, would eliminate all the mandatory requirements of the guidelines, including the sanction that non-compliance could lead to a loss of NIH funds.

The alternative proposal, submitted by RAC-member Dr Susan Gottesman of the National Cancer Institute, would retain the guidelines as a required procedure for those receiving NIH grants, including the requirement that certain experiments be reviewed either by RAC or by local Institutional Biosafety Committees (IBCs). The containment classifications, however, would be reorganized, and containment requirements for some classes of experiments would be made less stringent.

The potential consequence of transforming the guidelines into a code of practice for community opinion at local and state levels dominated the discussions.

Most informed scientists who had sent in written comments expressed strong support for making guidelines voluntary, arguing that risks once thought plausible had now been shown to be either remote or non-existent. Dr Paul Berg of Stanford

University, for example, one of the three signatories of the original letter suggesting a moratorium on rDNA research, wrote that he believed the guidelines "are now dispensable".

The institutional response, however, has been different. Many local IBCs, those in universities and in private industry, told NIH that they were not experiencing major difficulties in implementing the guidelines as they now stood. Several warned that the absence of mandatory federal guidelines would provide an opportunity for the introduction of a patchwork of individual laws.

The Industrial Biotechnology Association, for example, which represents a number of small biotechnology companies such as Cetus and Genex, wrote that "one significant reason for adherence to a uniform system of federal guidance and overseeing is our belief that such an approach is more compatible with commercial development and the benefits it brings to society than would be a system of varying local requirements".

If there was an unexpected consensus at Monday's meeting that a strong federal presence in regulating rDNA research

remains desirable, there was less agreement on whether the potential hazards of such research should be treated differently from related areas of biomedical research.

Some members of the committee, arguing the lack of substantial evidence of additional hazard, suggested that this was a reason for adopting uniform practices by making guidelines voluntary. Others, however, used the same data to urge that the experience of RAC should be used as a basis for encouraging a similar approach to research with other organisms.

After hearing the arguments for both proposed revisions, the members of the committee voted by 17 to 3 to adopt those put forwards by Dr Gottesman as the basis for revising the guidelines, rather than those which had been informally endorsed at the September meeting. It also agreed to set up a small working group to revise the specific recommendations which she had put forward to change the current classifications, and to present its conclusions to the director of the National Institute for Allergic and Infectious Diseases, Dr Richard Krause, who will decide what changes to the guidelines will be introduced.

David Dickson

Budget protection for research

Washington

The United States scientific community has done relatively well out of the budget proposals which President Ronald Reagan submitted to Congress on Monday for the fiscal year 1983, which begins on 1 October.

Overall, the President is requesting an increase of about 10 per cent in expenditure on research and development. With an officially-estimated inflation rate of 6.5 per cent, the Administration is claiming that this would represent a real growth in research and development of about 3.5 per cent. The same pattern of growth is being suggested for the basic research budget, scheduled to increase by 8.8 per cent to a total of \$5,821 million.

In both instances, the major contribution to this growth has been increased spending on military research, which rose 25 per cent between 1981 and 1982, and is scheduled for a further growth of 18.9 per cent next year.

Where these increases reflect Mr Reagan's election campaign promises to boost United States military strength, another promise is reflected in moves to reduce substantially federal sponsorship of energy research, on the grounds that this should, where possible, be made the responsibility of the private sector.

The most dramatic reductions are proposed in solar research and other renewable energy sources, such as hydro-power and geothermal, scheduled to come

Recommended budget obligations for fiscal year 1983

	Research and development		Basic research	
	Total (million \$)	Increase 1982-83(%)	Total (million \$)	Increase 1982-83(%)
Department of Defense	24,469	18.9	781	16.0
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	6,513	12.1	682	17.6
Energy Research and Technology Administration*	3,917	-13.3	741	14.5
National Institutes of Health	3,533	3.1	1,897	3.1
National Science Foundation	1,033	7.5	984	7.9
US Department of Agriculture	838	3.8	359	8.1
Environmental Protection Agency	230	- 27.4	10	- 50.0
Other agencies	2,464		367	
Total	42,997	10.7	5,821	8.81

*Previously Department of Energy, intended to become part of the Department of Commerce.