

Inserm restructuring increases political control, says union

[PARIS] A proposed reform of the French biomedical research agency Inserm was last week rejected by staff union representatives at a meeting with management. Although the most controversial elements of the decree — such as splitting Inserm into five departments — have been abandoned (see *Nature* 391, 110; 1998), unions are still protesting at what they claim is a bid to increase political control over the agency.

Controversy centres on the increased powers the agency's administrative council would have over strategic decisions on research directions and funding. These decisions were previously reached through agreement by the scientific community and Inserm management.

The unions maintain that assurances about the continued role of Inserm's scientific commissions in decision-making are insufficient, and that the proposed appointment of the administrative council chairman by an interministerial committee marks a shift towards greater central control.

Although Inserm is obliged to consult the unions, the ministry does not have to abide by the vote of last week's meeting. Inserm staff will have a last chance to lobby for changes to the decree at a meeting of the agency's administrative council next week.

ESA and CERN link on data and communication

[MUNICH] Two European research organizations have forged links in technical fields and communication. The European Space Agency (ESA) and the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) have agreed to learn from each other's experiences in areas such as the handling and networking of large amounts of data generated by large-scale experiments, and in communicating the results of their experiments to the public.

Following a meeting last week between Antonio Rodotà, director-general of ESA, and Christopher Llewellyn Smith and Luciano Maiani, outgoing and incoming directors-general of CERN respectively, the two organizations agreed to set up working groups to propose specific joint activities.

France and Germany reach biotech entente

[MUNICH] Germany and France have agreed to cooperate more closely in biotechnology research, particularly plant genome research. The agreement was reached by the two countries' respective research ministers, Jürgen Rüttgers and Claude Allègre, during a German-French summit last week.

A bi-national symposium will take place in September, to be attended by representatives of the two governments as well as industrialists and scientists from both countries, to discuss ways forward.

UK police chief calls for national DNA database

[LONDON] A senior member of the British police force has called for a national DNA database of the entire population, which, he says, would cut the time and costs of investigating crime. But government officials believe that such a database would be too expensive, and civil liberty groups see it as an infringement of privacy.

Peter Gammon, president of the Police Superintendents Association, said that a national database would enable criminals to be identified before they became serial offenders. He said the database could also be used in medicine, with police applying to the courts for permission to use it. "It could not be achieved overnight," Gammon told *The Independent* newspaper. "But I am asking [for] a cool and frank period of discussion."

'Decadal survey' to pinpoint star projects

[WASHINGTON] Joseph Taylor of Princeton University and Christopher McKee of the University of California at Berkeley will together chair the US National Research Council's next 'decadal survey' of priorities for astronomy and astrophysics. Taylor shared the 1993 Nobel prize in physics for his discovery of binary pulsars. McKee, a theorist, heads Berkeley's Space Sciences Laboratory.

The last decadal survey, released in 1991 and headed by Princeton's John Bahcall, has strongly influenced federal budget plans for both ground-based and space-based astronomy projects. The survey committee, which is still to be selected, will begin work this autumn, with a final report due by 2001.

Launch uncertainty ends plans for Neurolab 2

[WASHINGTON] The proposed Neurolab 2 space shuttle mission will not fly after all. The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) had hoped to repeat the mission this autumn, giving space researchers from the United States, Europe and Japan more opportunity to study the nervous system's adaptation to weightlessness. Problems with research animals dying unexpectedly on the first flight (see *Nature* 393, 4; 1998) were seen as surmountable, and would only have required that some of the experiments be modified.

But uncertainty about launch dates for the first Russian and US components of the

international space station led NASA to scrap the idea of a Neurolab 2, and to reserve its autumn launch slot for a possible station assembly flight. After 15 years and 16 flights, the Spacelab programme has therefore come to an end.

Latin Americans form molecular biology body

[LONDON] A group of scientists from Latin America, Europe and the United States have set up an organization designed to develop molecular biology research in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries. The Ibero-American Molecular Biology Organization (IMBO) was formally set up at a meeting in Chile last week.

The organization was initially proposed last year (see *Nature* 391, 524; 1998). The eventual aim is to set up an international molecular biology research laboratory in a Latin American country within five years. A more immediate priority is promoting exchanges between scientists from member countries, as well as a journal publishing primary research and articles examining issues affecting science and the ethics of science.

Spain's lack of career prospects laid bare



[MUNICH] Six young scientists, inspired by the British film *The Full Monty*, campaigned for better career prospects by stripping in a Spanish concert hall last week.

The scientists, members of the group PIC (Personal Investigador Contrado) which campaigns for career prospects for young researchers, performed in Madrid's Sala Galileo in front of more than a thousand.

In a sketch opening an evening of pro-science propaganda supported by several professional pop groups and dancers, the scientists acted out a scene where the only alternative to unemployment after years of training as postdocs was to become strippers.

In the finale they shed their lab coats to reveal on their backs one of PIC's demands, that the government should more than double research funding to 2 per cent of gross domestic product, the European average.