

## US cancer research

# NCI "mismanagement" causes unrest at Frederick

## Washington

THE neat signs used to say "Frederick Cancer Research Center" on the Maryland campus redeployed by President Nixon in 1971 from US Army biological warfare research to the war on cancer. But now, since October 1981, the signs say "Frederick Cancer Research Facility", and the campus is far from happy.

The change of name is symbolic to many who work in the 67 low drab-looking buildings on 70 acres of US Army land at Fort Detrick. Many talk earnestly about Frederick's quest to become the "centre of excellence" that Nixon, at the dedication ceremony, said it should be. They say they do not want to work at a "facility" and that the change is symptomatic of how the National Cancer Institute (NCI) has over-managed them and forced some to go job-hunting.

A recent string of management decisions by NCI involving Litton Bionetics Inc, the chief contractor, Litton's strong-willed manager, Michael G. Hanna Jr, Johns Hopkins University and four other companies which now run the place with Litton, have some of the staff up in arms.

"The place is a great recruitment ground now", says Hanna, whose abrupt departure after building it up from a \$2.5 million per year centre in 1975 to approximately \$30 million last year, has been one cause of concern.

James L. Liverman, a former Department of Energy official brought in by Litton to run the basic research until a permanent leader is chosen, agrees that things have been going badly since the new regime began on 27 September, with five contractors, instead of just Litton, running the "facility". To help, Liverman has set up "transition groups" where different sides meet and talk out their problems.

But one scientist, who is rumoured to be job hunting, sees the year of problems and surprises as jeopardizing the goal of "a centre of excellence". The centre's reputation grew, in part, because good laboratories were induced to move the 35 miles from NCI's campus in Bethesda.

Peter J. Fischinger, associate director of NCI with responsibility for Frederick, says each of the recent decisions was made so that the government could be sure it was getting its money's worth at Frederick. He explained that since its opening in 1972, Frederick has been the object of suspicion by NCI grantees, congressmen and budget officials, because it is a contract programme, because it has grown like Topsy when other budgets have levelled, and

because some of the science may not be first-rate.

Others agree that the real issue has been NCI's attempt to control Frederick more closely in response to these criticisms.

Litton has held the contract to manage Frederick since 1972 and was the only bidder when a second five-year contract came up for competition in 1977. In response to complaints of unfairness, NCI let it be known in advance of the second competition in 1982 that the management contract would be split into five.

Many on the Frederick campus were intrigued by the fact that Litton's main competitor for the \$8 million basic research programme was Johns Hopkins University. In August it was announced that the £30 million contract for operations and technical support would go to PRI — a small \$5 million-a-year Rockville company. In late August, Harlan Sprague Dawley won the \$1.6 million contract to run the animal breeding service. In early September it was announced that Litton, not Johns Hopkins, would run the basic research programme. A small company was chosen for the computer service in September and the library contract was announced on 24 September, the Friday

before the Monday when all five would start running Frederick together.

Many even at NCI are puzzled that Hopkins did not win. Mark Pearson, the geneticist who was Hopkins' candidate to run the contract, says that the possibility of having graduate students and members of Hopkins' faculty linked with Frederick seemed likely to move Frederick light years closer to being a true centre of excellence.

An NCI official said Hopkins had lost because its bid would be more costly than Litton's and that the proposal entailed only the biology department interacting with Frederick. A Hopkins source, however, estimates that Hopkins' bid could have been only \$200,000 more than Litton's, and Hopkins had proposed a broad science-management advisory committee to assure complete Hopkins participation.

The real reason behind Hopkins' defeat is said to be that the evaluators asked whether Hopkins would be willing to undertake research requested by NCI outside the scope of the contract. Hopkins said maybe not.

A final cause of anxiety is the reprogramming of up to \$125 million in funds in the contract, now being undertaken at the recommendation of yet another group, a scientific review of the entire Litton basic research programme there, headed by Paul Zanecnik. NCI says the reprogrammed funds may be used by the new principal investigator, perhaps to concentrate on oncogene research. But many Litton scientists (who work alongside NCI scientists at Frederick) are wondering if Litton will be out in another five years.

Deborah Shapley

## US nuclear power

# Split vote on NRC safety limits

## Washington

WAVING aside objections from its technical advisory group, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) last week adopted a new safety standard for nuclear power plants that would for the first time define what level of safety is adequate. The standard, not legally binding during a two-year trial period, sets a goal of one core-melt accident per 10,000 reactor-years.

The standard also calls for the risk of accidental death from nuclear power plant operation not to exceed 0.1 per cent of the average background risk experienced by the general population, both for immediate death and cancer death. Those background risks are 5 in 10,000 per year for accidental death and 20 in 10,000 per year for cancer death, according to NRC staff member Robert Bernero.

Bernero said that of 16 plants studied, 7 exceed the safety goal "in one respect or another". He said that the core-melt risk varied from a factor of 10 below the goal to a factor of 10 above in the plants examined.

NRC's Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards, in a letter to the commission,

objected to several aspects of the new standard. While not opposing the explicit safety goals, the advisory committee wanted to retain the present standard of reducing risk to a level "as low as reasonably achievable". The advisory committee also advocated integrating cancer risks over the entire surrounding population of a plant, rather than limiting the calculation to a 50-mile radius.

The new standards will not act as regulations in themselves, but will be used by NRC as guidelines in deciding what safety equipment and modifications to require in power plants. Bernero said that, nonetheless, "the mere existence of the standards would press for improvements" in plants that exceed the goals. But NRC member Victor Gilinsky — the sole opponent of the new standard in the commission's 4-1 vote — said the effect would be to "place a cap on regulation, not on risk". Gilinsky was unsuccessful in his attempts to persuade the other commissioners even to meet the advisory committee to discuss their objections.

Stephen Budiansky