

# NIH speeds to resolve charges of scientific error

- Congressional inquiry spurs action
- Nobel prizewinner defends research

## Washington

THE National Institutes of Health (NIH) has moved into high gear in its investigation of a paper by researchers at the Whitehead Institute of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Tufts University who include the Nobel laureate David Baltimore.

A three-member team of immunologists appointed by NIH was in Boston last week conducting interviews. NIH director James Wyngaarten expects their report will be on his desk within weeks.

The dispute over the paper (*Cell* 45, 247; 1986) has become a focus of media attention since allegations of data misrepresentation in the paper, made by two NIH researchers, Walter Stewart and Ned Feder, were taken up by a Congressional subcommittee hearing on scientific fraud and misconduct (see *Nature* 332, 671, 1988).

Stewart and Feder are well known for their controversial investigations into scientific misconduct. Their criticisms of the *Cell* paper have been widely circulated and an analysis of them appears on pages 795–797 of this issue.

David Baltimore responded with a "Dear Colleague" letter to the scientific community, dated 17 May, that defends the research in question and urges a speedy review by NIH. Baltimore says he has consistently sought an investigation by researchers with sufficient expertise to evaluate the issues, something he believes Stewart and Feder do not possess.

Congressional interest in the veracity of a paper published in a specialist journal has many in the scientific community worried. The committee involved — the oversight and investigations subcommittee of the House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce — has a powerful chairman in John Dingell (Democrat, Michigan) and has developed a reputation for tough questioning and 'hardball' tactics. But it has more expertise in investigating defence contracts than in checking data on the expression of immunoglobulin genes.

In its hearing on scientific misconduct it concentrated on the *Cell* paper. But Baltimore was not invited to testify, nor were any of the other five authors, including the principal author, Thereza Imanishi-Kari, now at Tufts University.

The chief witnesses were Stewart, Feder and O'Toole, all on record as critics of the paper. The subcommittee also did

not contact members of a Tufts University committee that had already investigated the paper.

For his part, Baltimore writes that "The halls of Congress are not the place to determine scientific truth or falsity." He has hired the high-powered Washington law firm of Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld to advise on how best to cope with Congressional interest.

Baltimore would like to see NIH put in place procedures that will "neutralize the activities of such as Mr Stewart and Dr Feder by quickly responding to charges of fraud and misconduct." But NIH's recent attempt to write new fraud guidelines has been stymied by the White House Office of Management and Budget.

The subcommittee has since gone a step further and borrowed Stewart and Feder from NIH on an as-needed basis to provide expert advice for future investigations. Stewart has already conducted interviews with investigators in Boston relating to the *Cell* paper.

Among those questioned were Henry Wortis and Brigitte Huber of Tufts University, both on the committee that had previously examined the paper. Both are concerned at the way a witness in an investigation has become an investigator.

NIH's attempts to investigate the Baltimore case have not run smoothly. It appointed a five-member investigatory panel early this year. But it came out before Congress that some of the members had worked with Baltimore, raising conflict-of-interest questions.

A new committee had to be appointed and the process started again, but finding five qualified people at short notice was difficult. Instead a three-member panel — Ursula Storb of the University of Chicago, Hugh McDewitt of Stanford University and Joseph Davie of Searle Pharmaceuticals — was appointed.

Their brief, according to Mary Miers who directs NIH misconduct investigations, is to see "whether the published paper was supported by the data...and to see what, if any, corrective action would be needed if there were errors".

The NIH committee has been given a very short time to draw its conclusions. NIH runs the risk that it will not fully satisfy Congress and invite further investigation. The Dingell subcommittee has received reports of more than a dozen new allegations of misconduct since April.

Joseph Palca & Alun Anderson

## Scientist for president

### London

THE appointment of Professor F. Bruno Straub as the new president of Hungary was last week recommended by the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP). This is a significant step in implementing one of the major reforms advocated by the HSWP conference last month — the separation of the functions of state and party. For Straub, although a member of the Hungarian National Assembly (Parliament) since 1985, is not a member of the HSWP.

The party conference urged greater democratization of Hungarian political life, but ruled out the possibility of more than one political party. A greater role for the national assembly, and for its indepen-

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*Straub—from enzymologist to president.*

dent members, is one of the recommended means of achieving this goal. Although the presidency is a ceremonial post, the nomination of a non-party man to this post is a big surprise.

Straub, an enzymologist, is a vice-president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He is well-known internationally, having for many years represented the academy in the International Council of Scientific Unions. In the early 1970s, he was the prime mover in establishing the academy's Biological Centre at Szeged, and, as this was partially financed by United Nations funds, in organizing training courses for young biologists from developing countries. More recently, through the national assembly's environmental council, he has exerted considerable influence on policy decisions, including the protection of Lake Balaton, and the drawing up of measures intended to minimize the adverse effects of the Gabcikovo-Nagy-maros hydroelectric project on the Danube.

Vera Rich