

# Changes in misconduct investigation planned

- Present procedures declared inadequate
- New legislation may obstruct plans

## Washington

THE US Public Health Service (PHS) has decided to create a new mechanism for dealing with scientific misconduct by establishing an Office of Scientific Integrity in the office of the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

This move comes after months of internal debate on how best to tackle the growing concern that current procedures for investigating alleged scientific misconduct are inadequate. But the rapid implementation of the new plans may not be easy, for they seem to be at odds with legislation about to be introduced in Congress.

Virtually nobody is satisfied with present procedures for dealing with scientific misconduct. Investigations have taken much longer than expected, there have

in current procedures. Earlier this year, Representative Henry Waxman (Democrat, California) asked the Inspector General of the Department of Health and Human Services to determine whether PHS was putting sufficient resources into its investigations.

Legislation is at present being drafted by Waxman and Representative John Dingell (Democrat, Michigan) — head of the powerful House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee — that would also create an office of scientific integrity, but place it in the assistant secretary's office, not at NIH. It seems certain that Congress will require assurance of a serious commitment to investigating misconduct before it agrees to let NIH retain primary responsibility for that role.

Joseph Palca

Although the new office of scientific integrity will be located in the office of the NIH director, it will be responsible for investigations and procedures for all PHS agencies, including the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration and the Centers for Disease Control.

Congress has put pressure on PHS to make changes in the way it deals with misconduct. Last year, there were several hearings that drew attention to problems

## US SCIENCE POLICY

# Who should decide policy?

## Washington

THERE is a need for a new government body to set national goals in science and technology in the United States. That much was agreed at hearings held over the past two weeks by the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Science, Research and Technology and the Senate Committee on the Budget. But the form that the new policy-making body should take was a matter of great debate.

The consensus that the United States lacks a coherent national policy in science and technology has arisen for two reasons. In recent years, emerging big projects, such as the sequencing of the human genome and the study of global climate change, have cut across government agency boundaries. But there is no central government body to determine the relative importance of these projects, and the budgets they should command. On another front, Congress and industry are realizing that the United States is being left behind in development of key new technology, such as high-definition television (HDTV); that is also perceived as due to a lack of a guiding national policy.

Former presidential science adviser George Keyworth revived the idea of a new department at the House hearing. But several subcommittee members and witnesses dismissed this idea. William Carey, former executive director of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and a former assistant director of the Bureau of the Budget, says a new department would be "crippled" by lack of support from other departments and agencies. And when Clyde Prestowitz of the Carnegie Endowment made a similar suggestion at the Senate hearing, Senator Ernest Hollings (Democrat, South Carolina) said "We would all be dead and gone" before such a department

is realized.

Carey instead favours proposals recently put forward by the National Academy of Sciences which call for collaboration between the Office of Management and Budget and the president's science adviser in determining priorities, objectives and budgets of large projects. A step in that direction has already been taken by the Committee on Earth Sciences of the Federal Coordinating Council for Science, Engineering and Technology, which has for the first time prepared a cross-agency budget for research on global climate change in 1989 and 1990.

Under the academy proposal, cross-cutting research activities would be reviewed by budget and appropriations committees in Congress before being broken down for consideration by individual agencies. Another approach, put forward by Lawson Crowe (University of Colorado), is to establish a national commission, composed largely of scientists, that would rank large-scale projects according to scientific merit, social benefit and "programmatic implications".

But most subcommittee members seemed more concerned with mechanisms for strengthening economic competitiveness than with scientific policy. Almost every witness was asked what should be done about HDTV, which is fast becoming the touchstone in Congress of the competitiveness of US industry.

The hearings are almost certainly a harbinger of a year of debate in Congress over the question of how to set science and technology policy. The same issues are certain to come up again when President George Bush's plans for giving his science adviser the status of an assistant to the president and for appointing a panel of independent advisers are put forward as legislation. **David Swinbanks**

Memo to John Tower: Perhaps this one's not quite right for you either...



been squabbles over who should investigate cases and Congress has felt that NIH may lack the will to tackle the difficult issues that inevitably arise. A report from the Institute of Medicine urges that encouraging proper research conduct is an important part of preventing misconduct (see *Nature* 337, 588; 16 February 1989). Accordingly, the new office at NIH will be responsible not only for investigating alleged misconduct but also for promoting high standards of laboratory practice.

The new office will make recommendations to the Assistant Secretary for Health, who is the head of PHS. The plan also calls for an Office of Scientific Integrity Review in the office of the assistant secretary to oversee investigations by the NIH office and to help develop policies for dealing with issues of integrity and misconduct.