

Panelist cries foul

Washington

WHILE the National Academy of Sciences and the courts are struggling with financial conflict of interest, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has run into a case of plain old outspokenness.

Earlier this month, FDA deputy commissioner Carol Scheman asked Norman Anderson, a Johns Hopkins University physician, to give up his voting status on a FDA advisory panel on breast implant safety. She says it was because *Time* magazine published excerpts from a letter to the FDA, dated 12 December, in which Anderson warned of a "breach of trust" by the implant's manufacturer, Dow Corning Wright. Those words suggested to Scheman that he had "already reached a conclusion" about the safety of the implants before the panel heard all the evidence.

That is probably true. Anderson has long been a critic of breast implants, and his letter of 12 December was written after he had reviewed internal company documents that suggested a cover-up by Dow Corning Wright. But as a past chairman of two previous FDA panels on breast implants, he is also well informed. And he has never made a secret of his opinions.

His punishment has drawn fire from such critics as Representative Ted Weiss (Democrat, New York), who claims that FDA is running dangerously close to infringement of the First Amendment right to free speech. In past months, FDA has similarly come under criticism for attempting to restrict the kind of scientific conferences that drug companies can sponsor and for censoring press releases and video advertisements from the pharmaceutical industry (see *Nature* 354, 421; 1991).

Scheman says that in this case Anderson appeared to have a "predisposition" against breast implants, which for the purposes of the panel was of just as much concern as a conflict of interest.

However, in a letter dated 13 February to FDA commissioner David Kessler, Anderson says that there is more to the FDA position than Scheman is admitting. In particular, he says that Scheman called him and asked him to relinquish his voting status on the panel a week before the *Time* article came out. According to Anderson, Scheman said that her definition of "conflict of interest includ[es] 'knowing too much'" about subjects under review.

In a letter of 13 February to Weiss, who has taken up Anderson's case, Scheman attempted to clarify the FDA's position: "Access to information does not create a problem...unless the member uses that information either to reach a conclusion concerning the subject of the Panel's review...or has made public statements which create the appearance that such a conclusion has been reached."

Christopher Anderson

'Big three' test the waters

London & Tokyo

A LITTLE-NOTED but potentially huge milestone in the history of research collaboration between the United States, Europe and Japan was reached this week when government officials, industrialists and academics gathered on 24 February in Toronto to launch a two-year pilot study on intelligent manufacturing systems (IMS). This is the first major collaborative programme of commercial significance involving the world's three main scientific blocs.

The IMS project has had a difficult and prolonged birth. Proposed two years ago by the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) (see *Nature* 343, 496; 1990), IMS is intended to apply cutting-edge information technology to industrial manufacturing. It was designed as a counterpart to the International Human Frontier Science Program, a MITI initiative that is now jointly supported by the G-7 nations and the European Communities and that supports basic research in molecular biology and neuroscience. Both programs are Japanese attempts to put money into collaborative research and to counter criticism by Western countries that Japan's economic success has been achieved by 'riding piggy-back' on the research expertise of Europe and the United States.

Because Western governments initially feared that the Frontier program was an attempt to pick the brains of their researchers, MITI officials decided that their next initiative would cover an area in which Japan is already acknowledged as a world leader. But the IMS project also became bogged down amid suspicions about Japan's motives, and the basic formula for collaboration worked out for the pilot project starting this week differs markedly from MITI's original plan.

MITI envisaged having \$1,000 million to spend over 10 years. Japan was to provide 60 per cent of this money, with the rest divided between the United States and the European Communities (EC). Most of the work would have been carried out in a single new research centre, set up in the EC or the United States, although the programme would have been administered from Tokyo.

But now the proposed international fund, the central administration and the research centre have all gone. Instead, officials were expected this week to choose three pilot collaborative research projects to be conducted in the home laboratories of the researchers involved. The nations taking part (the EC, United States and Japan have now been joined by Australia, Canada and the countries of the European Free Trade Association) will finance the work carried out on their own territory.

EC officials say that MITI's original plan seemed to offer Japan a competitive advantage. A central office in Tokyo would have given the Japanese an "immense wealth of information". The current plan, they say, should ensure that the three main partners benefit equally from the project.

But some observers believe that the US government is less pleased with the new approach. The negotiations have progressed "with Japan with its foot on the gas and the United States with its foot on the brake," according to one European Commission official. US officials are said to have opposed the central administrative office in Tokyo, but favoured the notion of Japan footing a hefty proportion of the bill.

Phyllis Genter, director of the US Department of Commerce's Japan Technology Program, offers a different explanation. She says that US negotiators wanted each of the partners to contribute equally; in particular, they asked that each should bring a similar package of new technology to the project, and not just money.

For their part, the Japanese proponents of IMS say they can live with the revised plans. Hidehiko Nishiyama, deputy director of MITI's industrial machinery division, says that Japan has plenty of experience with "decentralized" programmes through MITI's own domestic research schemes.

The big question now is whether the IMS formula will serve as a model for further collaborative ventures between Japan, Europe and the United States. A lot of people "who don't give a damn about IMS" will be keeping a close eye on the two-year feasibility study, says one European Commission official. But both the United States and the EC are withholding judgement on the value of the IMS model for future collaboration until the details have been more fully worked out.

Peter Aldhous & David Swinbanks

FAISAL PRIZE

Two honoured

London

Two European scientists have won the 1992 King Faisal International Prize in science and in medicine.

Sydney Brenner, director of the UK Medical Research Council's Molecular Genetics Unit in Cambridge, was awarded the science prize for his work in discovering the triplet codon genetic code, and demonstrating the existence of messenger RNA. This year's medicine prize has gone to Attilio Maseri, from the Catholic University of Rome, for his work on coronary artery disease. Brenner and Maseri will both receive \$93,000.

Peter Aldhous