

scientist, Mikulas Popovic, of charges of misconduct levelled at him by the department's own Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and it throws into question the value and role of ORI itself. Or, rather, it demonstrates to be mistaken the ambition of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) to create a novel quasijudicial process to determine allegations of scientific misconduct. NIH first created its Office of Scientific Integrity (OSI) in the hope of resolving serious allegations against researchers without formality; its officials used to claim that they would resolve even contentious cases such as researchers tackle problems in science, by investigation and inference. The first admission that OSI was out of its depth came two years ago, when it was transmogrified into ORI. Last week's decision could be the last nail in its coffin.

OSI has always been the wrong way to deal with questions of misconduct. Its inspiration appears to have been NIH's central but not exclusive role in the pattern of US research and its awareness of its own power, notably that of denying further research support to people in its black books. To be fair, NIH has also been under pressure from the US Congress to ensure that public funds used to support research are honestly spent, although it might have done more than it has to persuade congressmen that cases of scientific misconduct differ qualitatively from the financial scams with which they are more familiar. Even so, NIH should not have allowed itself to be trapped into the implicit promise that it would police the research it supports, and enforce administrative penalties against those found guilty of misconduct, without running into legal difficulties.

That is how it has now been tripped up. To declare that a person is no longer eligible for research support amounts to deciding that his or her career as a scientist is at an end. For a public institution such as NIH to make such a decision publicly is unthinkable without the paraphernalia of what the constitution calls "due process" — the right to representation by counsel, the right to hear the allegations and to question those who make them, seemingly rules on the admissibility of evidence and so on. But OSI did not follow these rules, nor pretend to. Nobody should be surprised that it has now been found deficient. But there is no chance that OSI's successor, ORI, can be reformed to meet the public need that justice should not only be done but should be seen to be done. Better to abolish ORI.

That does not mean that NIH can wash its hands of misconduct, or even that would-be fraudsters can falsify data freely. On the contrary, the demise of ORI could pave the way for more effective mechanisms. As the research world knows, misconduct is best dealt with at the institutional level, where close colleagues (and whistle-blowers, if there are such) can confront those acting suspiciously. But experience shows that institutions prefer to hide from unpalatable truths. NIH could help to ensure that this does not happen at institutions where its own funds are engaged by insisting on investigations by truly independent committees and by making the findings public. Other public agencies, of course, should follow suit. Meanwhile, NIH should firmly explain to the Congress that there are unavoidable limits to

its power to act as policeman even for biomedical research in the United States.

Suspicious that the result would be that people given to mishandling data would then be free to falsify at will are entirely misplaced. Just as close colleagues are often the best judges of the integrity of a person's work, so by their decisions on matters such as collaboration and promotion are they often the most effective arbiters of his or her continued success. It will be excellent if responsibility for deciding on misconduct cases can be returned to where it belongs, the research community, and if the community can be kept up to the mark in vigilance and fairness. The tragic interruption of Dr David Baltimore's career should show that the penalties can be severe enough to satisfy the most bloodthirsty congressman. □

A date with Darwin

Britain is getting good value for money from its overseas biodiversity programme.

MORE than a year after the surprise commitment by the British prime minister, John Major, to underwrite research into conservation biology, made in June 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, a little money is to be spent. Some may say that the money — £6 million over three years — is too little too late. But in the Darwin Initiative, the perennially unpopular Mr Major may at last have done something right, for the plan is a genuinely good idea in which British expertise could have a distinctive part to play.

Six million pounds is of course a paltry sum, but the intention of the Darwin Initiative was never to appropriate large sums for big projects in which other bodies are already engaged. Rather, it was meant as a resource to seed the activities of smaller organizations with grants of a few tens of thousands of pounds. The emphasis on the training of researchers in developing countries is especially sensible; that should ensure that what funds there are will be used efficiently. Britain may yet find itself applauded despite the small price it has paid for the grand promises made in Rio.

This year's grants awarded from this small pot (see page 100) may even help to quieten past passions over systematic biology in Britain. After all, it is only three years since the Natural History Museum's 'corporate plan' caused such a stir that the House of Lords was moved to a formal inquiry into the perilous condition of the field. In passing, the Darwin Initiative may help to fill some of the gaps then identified. It will also reinforce the impression that has been growing over the past few months that clever marketing by the Natural History Museum, the London Zoo (now not endangered) and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, which together epitomize biodiversity in the public mind, has transformed biodiversity from the pursuit of bearded visionaries to the legitimate — even fashionable — concern of millions. Major may one day be asking how many of them vote Conservative. □