

'Error of judgement' over gene safety rules

London. Researchers from Birmingham University attracted widespread public criticism last week over their failure to meet the requirements of revised safety regulations on experiments with genetically engineered organisms. The criticism followed a decision by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to halt their research into the use of adenoviruses to insert oncogenes into human cells.

HSE officials acknowledge that the hazards of the work, being carried out in the university's department of cancer studies, are only "theoretical". But they acted swiftly to suspend the project after judging that the department had "failed to undertake a sufficient assessment of the risk to humans".

Their approach has been backed by John Beringer, professor of biology at the University of Bristol and head of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment.

"Where there is any doubt, people have got to take extra care, and be seen to be taking extra care," says Beringer.

The HSE's action followed confusion over the level at which the research should have been classified. Under the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations that came into force in February last year, the HSE had to be notified of any level 2 work within a set period.

Members of the Birmingham research team, headed by Phillip Gallimore, thought they had fulfilled the necessary requirements by notifying the HSE of the precautions they had taken. But when an inspector visited the department last December, he decided that the research fell into a higher category of risk, and that the safety precautions being taken were therefore inadequate.

David Westbury, vice-principal of Birmingham University, says that scientists in

the department made "an error of judgement". But he adds that the affair forms part of a larger debate over the precautions needed to ensure the safety of experiments using genetically-engineered organisms.

The failure to meet the new standards had occurred partly because of the change in regulations, and partly because of an ongoing debate over the nature of the risks involved, he said. "It was a difference in opinion which is now being resolved."

But the HSE denies that the matter is merely a question of differing opinions. Working with the Advisory Committee on Genetic Modifications, the agency has produced detailed guidance on assessing the risks of particular types of experiment.

Two prohibition notices were served in December requiring the work to be temporarily halted, and an "improvement notice" was served last week specifying the safety changes needed if the work is to proceed.

The actions of the HSE have been welcomed by those concerned about the potential hazards of experiment using genetically engineered organisms as an indication that the agency's inspectors are prepared to use their powers to enforce the new regulations.

Professor Gordon McVie, scientific director of the Cancer Research Campaign, which is funding the work in question, says that the public "should be reassured that there is no danger that they could contract cancer as a result of the viruses used in these experiments".

But the publicity attached to the HSE's actions has not received such a warm reception. McVie acknowledges that the inspectorate has a useful role to play in "protecting scientists against false accusations"; but he adds that the publicity surrounding the affair has "not been the kind of publicity we want".

Fiona Gammie

Research head backs students

Munich. Karl-Heinz Hoffmann, the new head of Germany's science council, the Wissenschaftsrat, has announced his support for students who are opposing a bill approved by the Bundestag last week that would freeze funding for student grants until 1996.

If passed into law, the new rules would require students to pass a progress test after two semesters in order to continue receiving a grant. The government's aim is both to save money and to encourage students to finish their courses more quickly.

Students throughout Germany held demonstrations and strikes last week against the rules. Despite the government's claims that many students spend too long at university, the students argue that they cannot be expected to finish their studies under pressure because they have to work to supplement their grants, which do not cover living costs.

Hoffmann, who took over as head of the Wissenschaftsrat from zoologist Gerhard Neuweiler two weeks ago, agrees with them. "Before we start to insist that study time is reduced, we must also make sure we can provide better conditions for students," he adds, referring to the overcrowded classrooms and poor-quality teaching found in most universities.

Hoffmann says he shares with his predecessor a deep concern for the next generation of German scientists. While agreeing that there are too many university students in general, he argues that there are "still too few scientifically qualified young people".

At least half of the science students at universities would be better placed in the more technically orientated higher education establishments, the *Fachhochschule*, he says. But the number of places must first

be increased; and more funding should be made available to young scientists once they are qualified, to help them to establish research careers.

Hoffmann, a 54-year-old professor from the Institute of Applied Mathematics in Munich, is keen to accelerate plans for improving the standards of teaching during his year as head of the science body.

Economic restrictions mean that the Wissenschaftsrat will be unable to achieve all its goals in the near future. But Hoffmann has certain priorities. First, he wants to address recent cuts to university library budgets which he considers unfair on students.

Second, Hoffman says he wants a rapid improvement in electronic communications networks between universities, research institutes and industry. The introduction of faster networks must be a priority for Germany, which lags behind other countries such as the US and Japan, he says.

Rainer Ortleb, the German minister of education, resigned last week after three years in office, shortly after the government approved his bill to save DM50 (US\$29.5 million) by reducing student grants.

The controversial bill has provoked widespread student action, and many of Germany's 16 state governments have already said they will vote against it in the upper house, the Bundesrat. Officials deny a connection between the bill and Ortleb's resignation, which they ascribe to health problems.

His place has been taken by Karl-Hans Laermann, a west German engineer and former university lecturer who was previously FDP spokesman on research policy and head of the party's committee on education, research and technology. **Allison Abbott**

Rockefeller launches \$1 million challenge

London. In a bid to stimulate commercial interest in one of the major health problems of developing countries, the Rockefeller Foundation in New York has taken the unusual step of offering a prize of US\$1 million for the development of a simple kit to diagnose two sexually transmitted diseases (STD), chlamydia and gonorrhoea.

The scheme is open to anyone. But the foundation is hoping that the prize money will in particular attract biotechnology companies, which have experience of developing diagnostic kits. Such companies "do not really have an incentive for producing STD diagnostics for developing countries," says Seth Berkley, associate director of the foundation's health services division. □