

Misconduct office cuts backlog of alleged cases under review

[WASHINGTON] The US government office charged with investigating and ruling on alleged misconduct by government-funded scientists has cut its case backlog to a record low, says a report released last week. The Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Research Integrity (ORI) said that at the end of 1996, it had 48 misconduct cases formally under review and was studying allegations in 13 more.

"This is a tremendous improvement," ORI's annual report for 1996 says. It says that when the office began its work in 1992, it had a backlog of 70 cases and more than 600 unresolved allegations. In 1996, the office received 196 new allegations of misconduct, of which 62 were assessed in depth to decide whether an investigation should be launched. Of these, 80 per cent were resolved within the calendar year, with an average processing time of 29 days.

France plans reforms for grandes écoles

[PARIS] Claude Allègre, the French minister of national education, research and technology, is planning to reform the renowned *grandes écoles* to improve links with universities in research, teaching and student mobility.

Allègre has set up a commission to propose reforms, chaired by Jacques Attali, a former adviser to the late President François Mitterrand, and a product himself of the *grandes écoles*. The commission includes university and industry leaders, and leading researchers such as the geneticist Axel Kahn, and Georges Charpak, the 1992 Nobel prizewinner in physics.

Although the cream of students admitted to the *grandes écoles* generally enjoy much better facilities than their university counterparts, the universities have a stronger research base. Allègre has criticized the lack of a technology base in the *grandes écoles* as being partly responsible for what he claims is a lack of innovation among the elite who go on to run France's large enterprises.

FDA law aims to speed up drug approval

[WASHINGTON] After three years of contentious efforts to change the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), congressional supporters saw their labours succeed last week when President Bill Clinton signed into law the FDA Modernization Act of 1997, the most significant change in FDA procedures in more than 30 years.

The law, which aims to speed the approval

of new drugs and medical devices, may also make access to experimental therapies easier for sick patients while FDA approvals are pending. To speed approval times, companies will be allowed to hire third parties to review mainly low-risk medical devices. Clinton said that the law means that the FDA "wins the gold medal for leading the way into the future". But critics say it will expose patients to risky drugs and devices that are given speedy approval for the financial gain of their makers.

'NIH should stipulate mentoring for women'

[WASHINGTON] The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) should require principal investigators (PIs) to foster the development of female scientists as a condition of receiving funding, a conference on NIH research on women's health recommended last week. "Mentoring should be a mandatory component of every funded PI award for an R01 grant," the draft recommendations from the conference state. "NIH would provide a stipend for the mentoring."

The three-day conference in Bethesda, Maryland, was sponsored by the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health. The mentoring recommendation was compiled by a working group on career issues. At present NIH does not require investigators on standard R01 grants to offer career support to female co-investigators.

Imperial College plans departmental merger

[LONDON] Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine in London is merging its departments of geology and Earth resources engineering and its Centre for Environmental Technology into a single teaching and research unit, to be known as the T. H. Huxley School of Environment, Earth Science and Engineering.

According to Sir Ronald Oxburgh, rector of Imperial, the school "will develop new areas of activity that were previously inhibited by the interdepartmental boundaries". The school will come into existence on 1 January, and Oxburgh intends to nominate John Beddington, currently head of the Centre for Environmental Technology, as its first director.

Russian minister rejects call to delay reforms

[MOSCOW] Russia's science minister Vladimir Bulgak has rejected a demand from trade unions to postpone for a year or so his plans for the reform of Russian science, which are likely to lead to wide job losses.

The unions had asked that the reforms, which are due to be presented to the cabinet

early next month, should be held back for further discussion. But Bulgak, who is a vice-prime minister, confirmed that the government intends to press ahead. Speaking at the House of Government in Moscow last week, he said a detailed reform programme would be drawn up at the beginning of next year, and the results made public in March.

Bulgak said that the aim of the reforms would be to adapt the country's scientific efforts to the current state of its economy. "Science is an evergreen tree, but it has some branches which are already dead and should be cut off," he said. Bulgak added that certain organizations were likely to lose the right to use the word "scientific" in their titles.

Biotech and genetics consultation planned

[LONDON] John Battle, Britain's minister for science, energy and industry, has confirmed plans to stage a nation-wide public consultation on the impact of recent advances in biotechnology and human genetics (see *Nature* 389, 222; 1997). "These developments offer hope," he said on Monday (24 November). "But they also raise difficult ethical questions, and there is a real fear that technological advances are outstripping our capacity to handle them."

Battle has promised that the government will host a number of "public events" next summer. No decisions have yet been taken on what form these will take, although possibilities are said to include 'consensus conferences' and 'deliberative polling' intended to measure shifts in attitudes among those provided with an opportunity to gather and discuss information on particular developments.

Synchrotron lab formally opened in Brazil

[SAO PAULO] Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso has officially inaugurated a long-anticipated federal laboratory, the National Synchrotron Light Laboratory. Initially planned more than a decade ago, the laboratory has been completed at a cost of US\$70 million.

The laboratory, whose first beamlines opened last summer, is described as "the largest civilian scientific project ever developed in Brazil". It was designed by Brazilian researchers, and houses a 1.37 GeV electron storage ring that acts as a radiation source for applications in materials research.

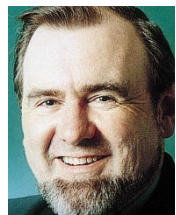
Correction

The photograph accompanying last week's story on Australian universities and described as being of Roderick West, the chair of a recent review of higher education, was in fact David Kemp, the new minister for employment, education and training. We apologize for the confusion.

Australia told that universities need greater competition

[CANBERRA] Competition among Australia's 36 public and two private universities is likely to intensify, with funds coming largely through students rather than directly from government, if a review of higher education is accepted by the government.

The review comes as higher education has barely settled down after restructuring initiated 10 years ago, and when it has been buffeted by heavy funding cuts. The review says there is "a compelling case for bolstering" research infrastructure, and urges that priorities for university research be "explicitly" based on national goals.



West: opposed to voucher proposal.

The seven-member review panel was set up last January after the former Education Minister, Amanda Vanstone, was accused of failing to lay out guidelines for universities while requiring them to maintain functions with resources effectively reduced by 10–20 per cent (see *Nature* 387, 222; 1997).

The wide-ranging review, chaired by Roderick West, a teacher of classics and retired principal of a private school, has set a goal of "universal access" for up to 95 per cent of school-leavers in a "seamless" system of universities and technical colleges. West says that he accepts universities are "hard-pressed" financially, but believes the system can cope with current funding levels if it becomes more flexible and open to market forces.

West wants to encourage an appreciation of 'Learning for Life' — the title of the first of the committee's two reports. Like other committee members, he favours granting students 'learning accounts' (or 'vouchers') to buy places on courses at institutions of their choice. He also talks of separating research funding from teaching.

The present system provides block grants to universities according to government-prescribed numbers of students and courses. Under the panel's proposals, universities would be freed from much government control and allowed to set their own fees. Postgraduates would be given scholarships transferable between universities.

David Kemp, Vanstone's successor after a recent cabinet reshuffle, reduced the political impact of the review by immediately declaring that the Coalition government would not approve a voucher scheme. A proposal for vouchers, which Kemp himself had proposed in opposition, was a major factor in the Coalition's failure to defeat the then Labor government in 1993.

Peter Pockley

Synchrotron delays 'put at risk' Europe's leading role

[PARIS] As Switzerland was last week giving its final approval to a planned 2.1-GeV Swiss Light Source, British and French scientists repeated calls for their respective governments to approve swiftly construction of proposed national synchrotron radiation sources in the two countries.

Scientists meeting at a two-day international conference in Paris on the use of synchrotron radiation in biology and medicine united behind a simple take-home message: modern synchrotron facilities are not a luxury, but an essential resource in modern biology. They warned that further delays may risk Europe losing its lead over Japan and the United States in this area.

British research administrators are scrutinizing future budgets to discover how to pay for a proposed 3-GeV synchrotron machine, Diamond. Their French colleagues face a different frustration: although the money has been promised by public funding agencies the government appears reluctant to give its approval to the 2.15-GeV Soleil, in particular because of political difficulties over the choice of a site.

There is broad consensus among researchers on the need for new synchrotrons in Europe. At the Paris meeting, those voicing support included Paul Williams, chairman and chief executive of the UK Central Laboratory of the Research Councils, Catherine Bréchnac, director-general of the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Yannick d'Escatha, director-general of the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), and Stephen Bieri, chief executive officer of the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology.

The four organizations signed an agreement to cooperate in the design of one another's machines, swapping technical expertise, sharing staff and cutting costs through economies of scale. A permanent board, with two people from each country, will coordinate user needs and wider aspects of synchrotron research among the three countries.

Diamond, which would cost £140 million (US\$237 million) over five years, would replace the existing Synchrotron Radiation Source (SRS) at Daresbury in Cheshire. The Wellcome Trust has recently pledged £10 million to its costs (see *Nature* 398, 318; 1997). But a recent upgrade of the SRS has bought time for researchers, ensuring that the facility will remain "in good shape for another five years", says David Norman, director of the SRS.

The situation is more critical in France, where the government has "suspended" approval of Soleil, intended to replace the

Lure facilities (800 MeV and 1.85 GeV) in Paris at an estimated cost of FFr1 billion (US\$174 million). Both current facilities are already outperformed by machines elsewhere, and are poorly geared to meet the need for bright sources of soft X-rays and ultraviolet radiation spectra by biology applications, the area of synchrotron use where demand is greatest.

The French government was about to approve Soleil when the process was interrupted by the snap general election in June. Although the new government has increased spending on research, priority has been given to creating jobs. Funding for existing big science facilities has been cut, and the government is reluctant to make new large commitments.

Choosing a site for Soleil from among the many regions competing for the jobs and investment will inevitably cause discontent among the losers, say observers. They suggest that the government may choose to postpone the disappointment until after next year's regional elections.

Some researchers also claim the government has uncritically lumped Soleil with other 'big science' facilities. Dino Moras, a researcher at CNRS's Laboratory of Structural Biology in Strasbourg, argues that synchrotrons are "not big equipment used by a few, but a shared tool used by many".

Many at the meeting said that access to first-class national machines would be critical if Europe was to be competitive in many areas of biology, such as genome research. With both Britain and France each having user communities of around 2,500, the political response is out of touch with the "huge demand" in the scientific community, says one French scientist, who describes approving Soleil as an "absolute urgency".

Resentment at the lack of a French government decision is particularly strong, given that bidding regions have already agreed to meet half the costs from their own budgets, while CNRS and CEA have agreed to pay two-thirds and one-third of the remainder respectively. With the financing structure in place, the government's reluctance to give the project the green light "seems crazy", says Moras.

Meanwhile, staff at Lure are concerned that Soleil might not go to the Saclay site near Paris being proposed by the Paris region. If the facility were to go elsewhere, French synchrotron research would be set back by "years", says Roger Fourme, a researcher at the University of Paris-Sud at Orsay, and head of Lure's department of biology/physics.

Declan Butler