Engineering academy moves to oust president

Washington. The US National Academy of Engineering (NAE) is trying to oust from office Harold Liebowitz, its recently elected president, in a move that opens the way for a public — and potentially damaging — battle for the soul of the organization.

At a meeting on 29 March, the 20-member council of the academy passed a vote of no confidence in Liebowitz as the organization's president, and submitted to the members an amendment to the NAE's by-laws which, if passed, would enable them to vote Liebowitz out of office.

Liebowitz immediately promised to fight the proposed amendment. In a strongly worded ten-page statement, he accused the council of having stifled his work as soon as he was elected last July, and promised to rescue the NAE from alleged domination by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), its larger and older sister organization.

Both academies share the same operating body, the National Research Council. But the NAS has ultimate responsibility for the entire complex. Last month, the NRC stripped Liebowitz from his position as its vice-chair, opening the way for his removal from the NAE (see *Nature* **379**, 761; 1996).

"I do not accept that the NAE should be subservient to the National Academy of Sciences," Liebowitz says in his statement. He claims that the two academies had "failed effectively to oppose cuts in engineering" and that science "had sold out engineering in recent budget debates".

Liebowitz, who was elected by a narrow margin as NAE president on a 'write-in' vote last year, after being excluded from the ballot, also argues that other officers of the academy "have been unwilling, from the outset, to work with me because I am an outsider".

But Morris Tanenbaum, vice president of the NAE and a former senior manager at AT&T, says that he and other officials have done everything possible to cooperate with Liebowitz. "I don't know anything more that we could have done," he says. "My conscience is clear."

Tanenbaum concedes that NAE's operations have been "negatively affected" by the Liebowitz row. Bill Colglazier, executive officer of the NRC, says that the flow of study requests to the academy complex has not yet slowed down as a result. But "there is certainly a potential worry that this might damage the credibility of the academies", he says.

Staff and officials of the academy complex attribute the conflict to Liebowitz's personal behaviour. But the embattled president prefers to blame it on the political relationship between the NAE and the NAS.

Indeed, the subservience of engineering to science — real or imagined — is an emotive issue for the 1,800 senior professors and industrialists who make up the NAE's elite membership. But having flirted with rebellion last July, it seems inconceivable that they will back Liebowitz this time round.

NAE members are due to receive their ballot forms on the proposed amendments to the by-laws this week. If these are passed, a resolution to remove Liebowitz could be voted on as early as next month.

Colin Macilwain

$60 million for genome sequencing

Washington. **The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced this week the long-anticipated launch of a $60-million pilot project to explore the technical and economic feasibility of large-scale genome sequencing technology. If successful, this could lead to the sequencing of the entire human genome by the year 2005.**

Six research groups are to share a total of $18 million in the current financial year, which ends in September, to investigate a range of sequencing and related technologies. In line with proposals first put forward last year (see *Nature* 375, 93; 1995) these will be aiming for an accuracy of one error in 10,000 bases.

"The pilot project will help us determine whether it will be necessary to strive for 99.99 per cent accuracy when we scale up, and whether it can be done cost-effectively with the sequencing strategies emerging during the next three years," says Mark Guyer, assistant director of the National Center for Human Genome Research (NCHGR).

The centre says that it is "encouraging" those receiving sequencing grants to release preliminary DNA sequence information "within a few days or weeks of its discovery". This is longer than a preliminary, controversial release time of about one day, endorsed at an informal meeting of sequencing team leaders held in Bermuda last month, but criticized as being insufficient to study the potential intellectual property implications (see *Nature* 380, 279; 1996).

Nevertheless, the NCHGR points out that this is considerably faster than research information is usually released. "The tremendous value of this data for disease research justifies this aggressive policy," says the centre, adding that the "finished" sequence, with all data "double-and-triple checked", is to be placed in databases shortly after.

In line with its previous policy, the centre says that those receiving the pilot project grants — while free to apply for patents on work involving additional biological experiments that reveals "convincing evidence for utility" of particular sequences (which may include full-length genes) — are also being "discouraged" from applying for patents on the raw genomic sequence themselves.

The NCHGR endorses the principle of patent protection as being necessary for the development by private companies of diagnostic and therapeutic products. But, it says, "patent applications on large blocks of primary human genomic DNA sequence could have a chilling effect on the development of future inventions of useful products". □

Nobel laureate charged with sexual abuse

Washington. Daniel Carleton Gajdusek, a Nobel prizewinner for his work on infectious diseases and a prominent researcher at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), has been charged with sexually abusing a fifteen-year-old boy whom he had brought to the United States from one of his many anthropological research missions to the South Pacific.

Gadjusek, 72, who was arrested on 4 April after an investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigations, denies the charges. He has brought up to fifty young people back to the United States from New Guinea and Micronesia, caring for them in his home outside Washington DC, and paying for their education.

Several colleagues of Gadjusek expressed shock and disbelief at the charges, and some are said to have helped raise the $350,000 bail on which he was released from custody on 6 April.

Gadjusek, who heads a central nervous system laboratory at NIH, won the Nobel prize for medicine in 1976 for his research on mechanisms concerning the origin and dissemination of infectious diseases, including kuru, which afflicts islanders in New Guinea. Much of his work is anthropological, and he has published descriptions of sexual relations between adults and children in primitive societies.

It is understood that these descriptions attracted the interest of the US authorities, who had previously investigated Gadjusek's relationship with the children he had brought back. But charges were filed only with the cooperation of a Micronesian man, now aged 23 and a college student, who claims to have been abused in 1987. **C.M.**