

## Brown's death leaves hole in Clinton's technology team

**Washington.** The death of Ron Brown, the US commerce secretary, in a plane crash in Croatia last week has deprived the Clinton administration of a powerful advocate for both its environmental and technology programmes.

Staff at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Institutes of Standards and Technology — the science agencies which between them comprise the larger part of the Department of Commerce — had come to admire his energetic fight to defend their budgets, as well as the department's continued existence, and were said to be distraught at the news of his death.

In particular, Brown had enthusiastically backed the Advanced Technology Program, seen as a key mechanism for using federal funds to stimulate industrial innovation. Brown's duties have been temporarily assumed by Mary Good, the equally indefatigable under secretary for technology in the commerce department. □

## Japan turns on neutrino detector

**Tokyo.** The world's largest neutrino detector, the Super-Kamiokande observatory, began operations last week 1 km underground in a lead-zinc mine in Gifu prefecture in central Japan. Super-Kamiokande is more than ten times the size of its predecessor Kamiokande in the same mine, which in 1987 detected neutrinos from a supernova in the Large Magellanic Cloud.

The new detector, which cost more than ¥10.4 billion (US\$100 million) to build, consists of a tank of crystal clear water 40 metres wide and 40 metres deep. It is lined with 11,200 highly sensitive 20-inch photomultiplier tubes that can pick up very faint Cerenkov radiation when neutrinos collide with water molecules. The detector is located deep underground to filter out cosmic radiation. □

## Chernobyl 'cancers' ruled out...

**London.** A Scottish health board has ruled out a local doctor's claims that a rise in the numbers of cases of cancer on a Scottish island could be linked to the Chernobyl nuclear accident of 1986.

Francis Tierney, a general practitioner on Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides, said he had diagnosed 18 cancers in a 19-month period and suggested that fallout from the Chernobyl accident could be one possible cause.

The claims made headline news in the British media. But last week the Western Isles Health Board said one cancer every month was not unusual for that region and that no cancer had been induced by radiation. Officials said, however, that a complete analysis would take a further three weeks. □

## ...as Ukrainians fear a repeat

**London.** One-third of Ukrainians polled from government, parliament, industry, universities and the media believe that a Chernobyl-style nuclear accident could be repeated.

The respondents, who took part in a survey shortly before the accident's tenth anniversary, blame poor management, and believe that the chances of a second accident are higher than 50 per cent. Fifteen of the so-called RBMK graphite-moderated reactors still operate in countries of the former Soviet Union. □

## UK physicists get greater role

**London.** Britain's Institute of Physics has reached agreement with the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) on how its members should play a greater role in discussions of the council's overall research policy. Some physicists had expressed concern that they were not consulted before the council's recent decision to cut back its funding for physics research while increas-

ing that for both mathematics and chemistry (see *Nature* 379, 755; 1996).

In particular, the EPSRC has agreed to invite the institute to comment annually on the business plan for the physics programme, while the institute has agreed to bring 'burgeoning areas of physics' to the attention of the council. □

## Maths PhD 'may be Unabomber'

**Washington.** Theodore Kaczynski, a 53-year-old former mathematics professor, was last week taken into custody by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), suspected of waging an 18-year campaign to kill scientists under the name of 'Unabomber'.

Kaczynski taught mathematics at the University of California at Berkeley for two years, after taking his PhD there in 1967. He was betrayed to the police by suspicious family members. FBI officers kept watch outside the wooden hut in Montana where he has lived since resigning his post at Berkeley in 1969. Unabomber, who killed three people and wounded a further 23 during his campaign, was opposed to modern technology. He frequently penned lengthy documents setting out his views. □

## Chemists take over their lab

**London.** The UK Laboratory of the Government Chemist (LGC) has been taken over by a management-led consortium as part of the privatization of all research laboratories owned and operated by the Department of Trade and Industry.

The laboratory was sold to LGC Holdings, a company formed by a consortium led by Richard Worswick, the Government Chemist, and including LGC management and staff, as well as the Royal Society of Chemistry and the investment group 3i. Worswick remains Government Chemist. □

## WHO seeks 'minimal' BSE risks

**London.** A two-day meeting at the World Health Organization of scientists engaged in research on spongiform encephalopathies concluded that the risk of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) being passed to humans would be "minimal" if their recommendations were implemented. The recommendations included banning from the human and animal food chain all parts of a cow that has shown possible signs of BSE, as well as animal brains, spinal cords and eye retinas. □

## DNA heads for the drinks cupboard

**London.** International regulatory authorities have allowed a private company in South Australia to profit from the sale of DNA. The material is packed in fluorescent green bottles and is available at supermarkets, petrol filling-stations, even nightclubs, priced at just US\$1.50 for 350 millilitres.

Lawyers and human rights groups have so far not reacted, possibly because the colourless liquid in question is a new brand of alcoholic spring water. Advertising campaigns for the drink — a wine-based beverage containing 5.5 per cent alcohol by volume and flavoured with lime and thyme — bear the message: "Where there's life, there's DNA".

"Everybody who sees it, just cracks up," says Islay Kennedy, proprietor of Vickery Wines, which holds the rights to the drink in the United Kingdom, where it will be launched next month. □

