

## UK position in particle physics 'threatened by business plan'

**London.** Britain's particle physicists are complaining that the latest business plan produced by the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC) for 1996 would, if implemented, impose significant damage on the United Kingdom's ability to remain at the forefront of research in particle physics.

Objections to PPARC's plan centre around its proposal to reduce the UK's contribution to the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN), while setting an overall ceiling for particle physics expenditure that would include the UK domestic programme. If CERN refused to accept the reduced subscription, cuts would have to be made in the domestic programme.

Peter Dornan, professor of physics at Imperial College, London, says that PPARC policy "would make any kind of long-term planning totally impossible, and limit what we can do and what we are committed to do". He adds: "It would have disastrous consequences."

Ken Pounds, chief executive officer of PPARC, says that he shares physicists' concerns at the increasingly inadequate funding of particle physics in Britain, but points out that this is partly due to the steep rise in the CERN subscription, and that the initial cuts in the astronomy programme last year were even bigger. □

## Monsanto set to buy Agracetus

**London.** W. R. Grace & Co., a major world supplier of chemicals for specialized health-care services, has announced that it plans to sell the transgenic plant business of its subsidiary Agracetus to the Monsanto Company for US\$150 million.

Grace will retain Agracetus' human gene therapy business, which will operate as Auragen Pharmaceuticals, Inc. Robert T. Fraley, pres-

ident of Monsanto's Ceregen unit, which develops new agricultural products, said that bringing together Agracetus' technical depth and Monsanto's application and commercial abilities will speed the development of new products.

During the 1980s, Agracetus pioneered technology advancement in the genetic engineering of plants, including generating the world's first transgenic varieties of cotton, soybeans and peanuts. □

## Work to start on Munich reactor

**Munich.** The Technical University of Munich is to start the immediate construction of its controversial research reactor, known as the FRMII, in Garching, near Munich, following the granting of a partial construction licence by the Bavarian environment minister last week. The licensing, which had been delayed for six months, was the final obstacle faced by the university before getting the DM720-million project under way.

The reactor has come under heavy criticism, both locally and internationally, because it will burn weapons-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU). This is contrary to an international agreement, signed in 1978, known as Reduced Enrichment for Research and Test Reactors, which aims to eliminate commercial trade in HEU. □

## India signals priority for thorium

**New Delhi.** Anil Kakodkar, a reactor engineer who played a key role in the design and testing of India's first nuclear explosive device in 1974, has been appointed director of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) in Mumbai, formerly Bombay. Kakodkar, who succeeds A. N. Prasad, was previously head of the centre's reactor design and development group. Soon after his appointment, he announced that BARC's main thrust would be to use India's thorium reserves, estimated at 360,000 tonnes, for power generation.

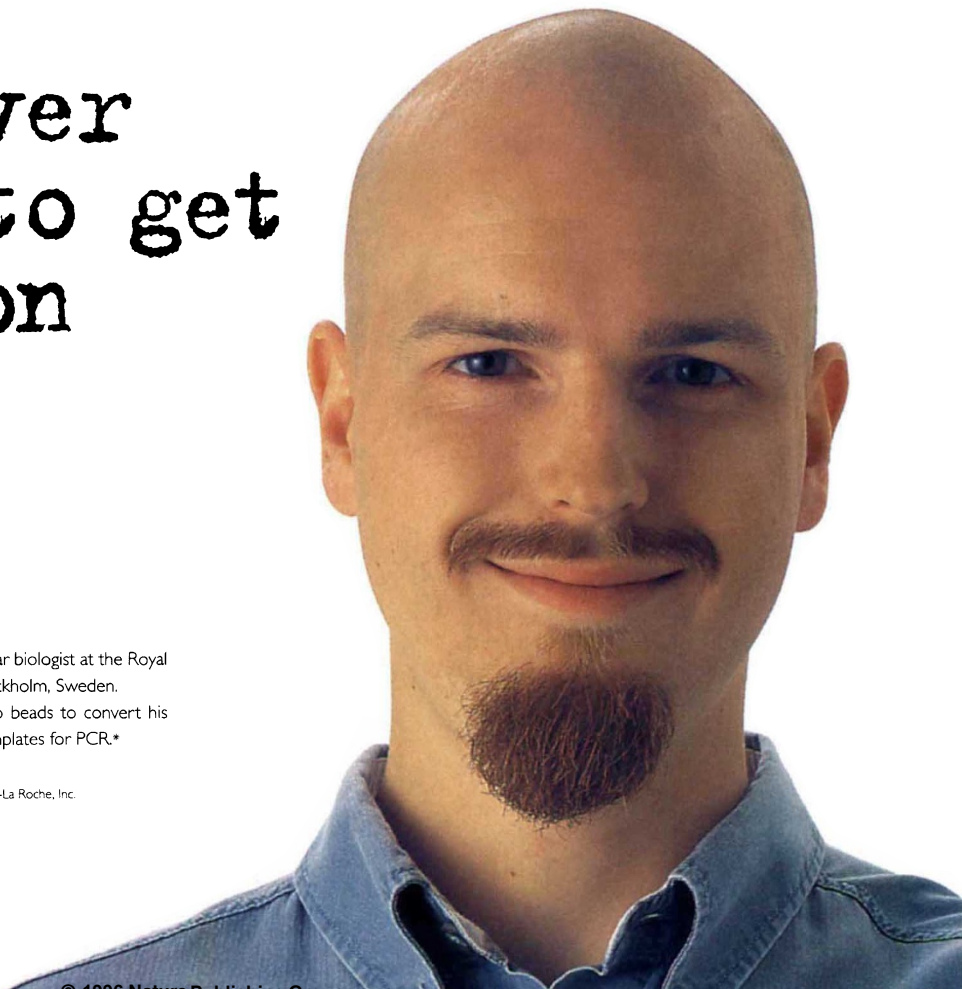
Kakodkar's appointment over the heads of several more senior

Patrik never  
fails to get  
a reaction

Patrik Samuelson is a molecular biologist at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden.

Patrik uses Ready-To-Go beads to convert his RNA samples into cDNA templates for PCR.\*

\* PCR is a patented process of Hoffmann-La Roche, Inc.



staff members is seen as a signal that the Indian government is keen to promote research on thorium. In the past few years, he and his team have designed a water-cooled reactor able to generate power by consuming thorium and a mixture of plutonium and uranium oxide fuel. With Kakodkar now at the head of the centre, work on this project is likely to accelerate. □

## Unilever centres on Bangalore

**New Delhi.** The Anglo-Dutch conglomerate Unilever has chosen Bangalore as the site for its fifth global research and development centre, the first to be established outside Europe and the United States. Expected to cost about US\$30 million, the new centre will make use of the rich and relatively inexpensive scientific talent available in India to support the company's global activities.

Unilever currently operates four research and development centres at Port Sunlight and Coleworth, both in the United Kingdom, Edgewater in the United States and Vlardigen in Holland. The Indian centre is expected to be in operation by May 1997. □

## Japan eases rules on DNA vectors

**Tokyo.** Japan's Science and Technology Agency (STA) has announced a revision of the rules on the approval of some recombinant DNA experiments, making it easier to use viral vectors and recombinant plants and animals developed overseas. Under the new guidelines, experiments using viral vectors will no longer need individual scrutiny by a committee within the STA; instead they will be able to gain approval from the safety committees of individual institutions.

Similarly, recombinant organisms produced overseas will no longer require individual assessment by the STA before they can be imported and used in experiments. Guidelines for field release of recombinant organisms have not been formulated as no applications for such experiments have yet been made, says the STA. □

## US foreign policy goes greener

**Washington.** Warren Christopher, the US Secretary of State, last week promised that environmental issues will play a greater role in US foreign policy in the future as part of a "far-reaching agenda to integrate fully environmental objectives into our diplomacy".

In an address delivered at Stanford University in California, Christopher said this agenda includes the creation of 'environmental hubs' at more than a dozen US embassies around the world to coordinate environmental activities on a regional scale. Environmental problems are becoming increasingly important to US national interests because of their trans-border nature, said Christopher.

He also announced two new State Department initiatives — an annual report on global environmental challenges, to begin in 1997, and a "Partnership for Environment and Foreign Policy" involving US businesses, environmental organizations and other groups working together on environmental issues.

The agenda outlined by Christopher is in fact partly a business strategy. "We are committed to helping US companies expand their already commanding share of a \$400 billion market for environmental technologies," he said. Although the speech focused mostly on existing programmes, US environmental leaders said it was significant for its high-level acknowledgement of what had previously been non-urgent issues. □

## Prize for biotech entrepreneurs

**London.** Britain's Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council has launched a 'new entrepreneurs' prize to encourage post-graduate researchers to consider industrial applications of their research. Eight teams will compete to produce the best business plan for a start-up company based on their research. Industrial and commercial tutors will be on hand to give advice. □

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