

UK council backs off plan to 'cap' particle physics bill

London. Britain's Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC) has softened its stance on the long-term funding of particle physics. In March, PPARC's council dismayed many physicists when it announced that it was placing a ceiling on overall future spending for the discipline, even though the growing burden of the subscription to the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) in Geneva could have meant that domestic spending was dramatically reduced.

Last week, however, the council agreed that provision beyond 1997-98 will depend on the outcome both of negotiations with CERN over Britain's subscription, and of a bid to the government for a special injection of £60 million towards the cost of construction of CERN's planned Large Hadron Collider. Meanwhile, domestic spending will be kept level for the next two years. □

Indian researchers cleared

New Delhi. An espionage case against two scientists at the Indian Space Research Organization (see *Nature* 372, 491; 1996) has been dismissed by a court in Kerala following a report by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) clearing both researchers.

After a year-long investigation, the CBI said it had found no evidence that the scientists had passed on designs of India's cryogenic rocket engine to two Maldivian women, as alleged by the state police and the Intelligence Bureau. Nambi Narayanan, one of the accused scientists, said in a statement that "scientists of this country need protection from being treated like third rate criminals based on false allegations". The spying case is believed to have delayed India's cryogenic rocket programme by at least two years. □

Contraceptive backing urged

Washington. Industry and government must jointly commit funds to both basic and applied research if the current "exciting" possibilities for the successful development of new methods of contraception are to be met, according to a report published last week by the Institute of Medicine in Washington.

The report points out that powerful political and social pressures have meant that no products are currently available explicitly designed to prevent or interrupt pregnancy in women exposed to unprotected sex. In the light of the decision by Roussel-Uclaf to abandon its plans to market one such product, RU486, the report says that "it may take partnership between smaller firms and non-profit organizations dedicated to women's reproductive health to bring these controversial products to market, as large pharmaceutical companies may be reluctant to do so". □

Duma passes science bill

Moscow. The State Duma, the Russia parliament's lower house, has adopted a long-awaited bill that provides tax relief for grants and stipends earmarked for science, education and culture. But the bill still needs to be adopted by the Federal Assembly, the upper chamber of the Russian parliament and later signed by the president, before it passes into law. □

Scripps reaps \$100 million

San Diego. The owner of a chain of US drug and grocery stores has donated \$100 million to the Scripps Research Institute in San Diego, California, equalling the record for the largest donation given to medical research in the United States. The donation, from L. Samuel Skaggs of America Store Inc. and his wife, Aline, will go towards establishing the Skaggs Institute for Chemical Biology.

The institute will focus on the study of new approaches to drug

design. The gift equals a \$100-million donation made last year to the University of Utah by Jon M. Huntsman, a chemical industry executive. The new centre will be headed by Julius Rebek Jr, professor of chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. □

Rutherford stays in public hands

London. Britain's Daresbury and Rutherford Appleton Laboratories, which provide central facilities for many university-based research groups, are to remain in the public sector as a joint 'non-departmental body' of the Department of Trade and Industry. This decision, announced last week by Ian Lang, the president of the Board of Trade, follows a close examination of various possible future arrangements, including passing the two laboratories, now run jointly as the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils (CLRC), to the private sector.

In announcing his decision, Lang said he had been satisfied that the current arrangements, under which CLRC obtains most of its income from competitive contracts and service-level agreements, "bring suitable market forces to bear on it". He did not, however, rule out "full independence from the public sector" of four institutes of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, including the John Innes Centre and the Silsoe Research Institute. □

Detectors head for profits

Paris. Who said particle physics doesn't pay? First, the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) gave the world the World Wide Web. Now medical equipment based on a particle detector developed there by Georges Charpak, who won the Nobel prize for physics in 1992, could earn up to US\$80 million a year for Biospace Mesures, a company formed last week to market the devices.

Eurisys Mesures, a leading manufacturer of nuclear equipment, owns 51 per cent of the new company. The remaining 49 per cent share is owned by Biospace Instruments, a company that Charpak founded in 1989 with the l'Ecole Supérieure de Physique et de Chimie Industrielles de la Ville de Paris (ESPCI). □

Gene panel to be disbanded

Washington. Harold Varmus, the director of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), has announced plans to close down its Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC), first set up in the late 1970s to provide a regulatory framework for experiments using recombinant DNA techniques.

For the past eight years, the RAC has been reviewing proposed clinical trials of novel gene therapies. But its work has dried up since submission rules were changed last year, and routine approval procedures were passed to the Food and Drug Administration. Recent meetings have been cancelled because of a lack of applications to review. The NIH has asked for public comment on the RAC's closure before implementing its decision. □

Yeltsin's homage to Sakharov

Moscow. The Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, last week laid flowers (right) at the grave of Andrei Sakharov, commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the birth of the dissident physicist and winner of the Nobel peace prize. "Andrei Sakharov was the first teacher of democracy for me and for the whole of Russia," Yeltsin said.

In a meeting at the Kremlin with the physicist and human rights campaigner Yuriy Orlov, Yeltsin pledged to make the defence of human rights a policy priority. In 1976, Orlov announced the formation of the Moscow section of the Helsinki Group for human rights, from Sakharov's Moscow apartment. □

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