Discovery of error brings sea-rise estimates back into line

Washington. A data-processing error has led to scientists working with data from a US altimeter on the Topex/Poseidon oceanography satellite to lower their estimates of global sea-level rise.

Preliminary findings based on Topex data in 1994 suggested that sea level was rising 3 millimetres annually, a figure that grew to 5 mm as more information came in. But scientists had been suspicious, as these figures did not agree with data from the French Poseidon altimeter on the same satellite, nor with Earth-based tide gauge measurements. After French space agency engineers found a mistake in an algorithm used to correct readings from a clock on board the US spacecraft, the Topex estimate dropped to between 1 and 3 mm per year, in line with the other measurements. □

UK research units under scrutiny

London. The British government is to take a close look at six research units supported by the Medical Research Council (MRC), to see whether they should be 'privatized', Ian Taylor, the science and technology minister, announced last week. The MRC's Dunn Nutrition Unit, Virology Unit, Toxicology Unit, Reproductive Biology Unit, Radiation and Genome Stability Unit, and Mammalian Genetics Unit all face "prior option reviews", along with other public sector research establishments. □

Japanese task force for *E. coli*

Tokyo. Japan's prime minister last week set up a Cabinet-level task force to deal with the growing epidemic of food poisoning caused by the 0157 strain of *Escherichia coli*. The epidemic has struck more than 8,000 schoolchildren in Japan and caused eight deaths. The task force includes 14 ministers, including those for health, education, agriculture, home affairs, labour, finance and transport.

They will order meat-processing facilities, often the primary source of infection, to check sanitation, and produce a checklist for improving the hygiene of school lunches. Debate is raging about the best way to treat those infected. Many doctors are prescribing antibiotics. But some argue that this may trigger bacteria to release toxins, causing renal failure and brain haemorrhaging. □

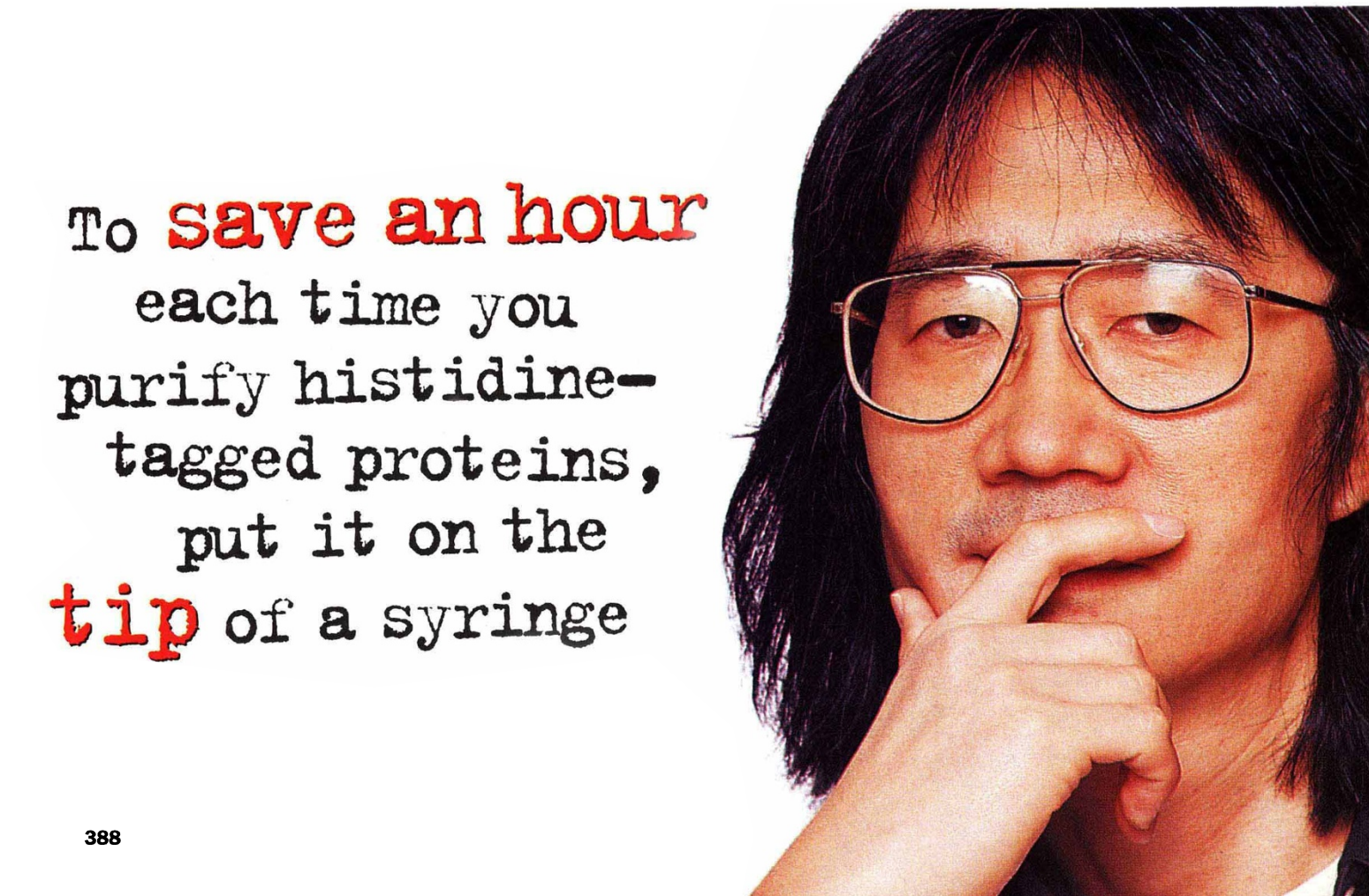
Soyuz launches — into market

London. Russian and European space launcher companies are joining forces to market the Soyuz family of launch vehicles around the world. The Russian bodies concerned are RKA, the agency which oversees Russian space activities, and the Samara Space Centre, which is in charge of developing, building and launching a range of rockets in addition to the Soyuz.

The European companies are France's Aerospatiale, the space vehicle manufacturer, and Arianespace, which has been responsible for the Ariane launcher developed by the European Space Agency. By combining their expertise and pooling finances, the four companies hope to encourage international interest in the Soyuz system which, they claim, is one of the world's most reliable rockets. □

Clinton nominates science board

Washington. President Bill Clinton has nominated five new members to the National Science Board, the governing body of the National Science Foundation. They are John Armstrong, former vice-president for science and technology at IBM; M. R. C. Greenwood, formerly of the White House science staff and now chancellor of the University of California at Santa Cruz; Stanley Jaskolski of Eaton Corporation, the electrical engineering company based in



Cleveland, Ohio; Vera Robin, an astronomer at the Carnegie Institution of Washington DC; and Bob Suzuki, an engineer who is president of California Polytechnic University, Pomona. The nominations have to be confirmed by the Senate. □

UK companies lag competitors

London. A study commissioned by the British Treasury from the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex has found that while publicly-funded research can yield significant economic benefits, many UK companies are not taking adequate advantage of it, unlike their competitors in the United States and Japan.

The report admits that measuring value for money is not easy. But it says that basic research "seems to have had a substantial impact on productivity", in particular by supporting a network of experts with economically valuable skills, and supplying new methodologies, instrumentation and information. Britain's chemicals and pharmaceuticals sectors in particular have been able to use this information to develop a strong research base, it says. □

Tokamak link for remote access

Tokyo. The Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute (JAERI) has established a high-capacity computer link with Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico and the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory in New Jersey. This will allow US researchers to carry out and observe experiments remotely in real time on the JT-60 Tokamak fusion device facility, which JAERI runs in Naka Machi, north-east of Tokyo.

A separate ISDN link allows video conferencing between the United States and Japan. JAERI hopes to extend the network to Europe in the near future. The link is seen as a model for remote access to the proposed International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), which Japan is lobbying hard to host. □

Delaney cancer clause killed off

Washington. Both houses of the US Congress have unanimously passed a pesticide regulation bill that kills the Delaney clause, a notoriously unenforceable rule which banned from processed foods any chemical found to cause cancer — at however small a dose. The bill, which President Bill Clinton is expected to sign shortly, will replace the 1958 clause with one requiring "reasonable certainty" that the chemical will do no harm. Remarkably, the bill won the support of environmental groups and the food industry. The two sides had reportedly grown tired of decades of fighting over the issue. □

R&D spending decline continues

Paris. **The decline in spending on research and development by most Western nations is continuing, according to the latest figures from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In its latest *Main Science and Technology Indicators*, published last month in Paris, the OECD points out that the slowdown in spending on R&D as a proportion of Gross National Product that had been observed in 1993 was "significantly less" in 1994 (see figure). But provisional data indicate this stability "will not continue into 1995".**

The deterioration in science activity since 1994 in Japan is indicated by falling R&D spending, and in the fact that its inventors are applying for fewer patents abroad. □