

NSF seeks to sharpen up process of peer review

Washington. The National Science Foundation (NSF) is to ask its reviewers to grade the 'broader impact' of each research proposal, as well as its intellectual merit, under new rules which it is considering for implementation next year. If the changes go ahead, reviewers would grade each proposal from 'poor' to 'excellent' under both of these criteria, and to comment on both criteria.

At present, reviewers give each proposal just one grade and one commentary. The grade is supposed to be based on a list of four detailed criteria: competence, intrinsic merit, utility and impact on the US science infrastructure. But NSF surveys have indicated that reviewers find these criteria verbose, and often ignore the last two.

Neal Lane, director of the NSF, says that the changes "will encourage reviewers to comment on more aspects of the proposal". He says that the objective is to provide better information to the programme officers who make final decisions on NSF grants, based on the reviews, and not to change the type of work funded. The NSF solicits 170,000 reviews each year of the 30,000 grant proposals it receives. □

FDA chief plans to quit

Washington. David Kessler, the paediatrician and lawyer whose controversial tenure as head of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) earned him the admiration of public-health advocates and the enmity of industry, announced last week that he is to resign after six years at the helm of the agency. Kessler will step down once a new agency chief is named, which is expected to be early next year.

Internal FDA candidates include two deputy commissioners, Mary Pendergast and William Schultz. But some Republicans in Congress insist that an outside candidate is needed to change the culture of the agency. Kessler expanded the agency's reach, tightening pre-market review standards for medical devices, and putting new limits on cigarette advertising to children. He also obtained the drug industry's support for the Prescription Drug User Fee Act, which has improved approval times for cancer and AIDS drugs. □

Call for global energy reforms

London. The World Energy Council, a nongovernmental, noncommercial organization representing energy interests from more than a hundred countries, called last week for a global effort led by the industrialized countries to forge a "pathway to sustainable development" by reconciling economic and social development based on increased energy use with protection of the environment.

The council says that action is required now in such areas as raising global energy efficiency, charging full market prices for energy, improving confidence in nuclear power, curbing atmospheric emissions and extending the principle that 'the polluter pays'. It also points out that by 2050, developing countries are likely to be using more than 60 per cent of primary energy supplies, and contributing the greatest proportion of atmospheric emissions. □

German budget cuts approved

Munich. The sun seems to have stopped shining on the German research minister, Jürgen Rüttgers. As part of the 1997 budget, approved by the German parliament last week, his ministry will receive only DM14.8 billion (US\$10 billion) next year, 5.6 per cent less than this year. This cut is more than double the average cut to ministries of 2.5 per cent.

In the parliamentary debate on the budget, whose size has been known for several months, Rüttgers said that "those who have less money must use it more intelligently". To that end, he is planning a series of competitions, along the lines of the recent Bioregio experiment, which challenged academics and industry together to come up

with ideas for developing biotechnology in their regions. The three winners gained preferential access to part of the ministry's existing biotechnology budget (see *Nature* 384, 298; 1996). Rüttgers says similar competitions could help to develop medium-term research strategies in areas such as molecular medicine and new materials. □

Data access 'open to abuse'

London. An inquiry by a UK House of Lords select committee into the effectiveness of European Union rules on freedom of access to information on the environment, contained in a 1990 directive, has found that they are unclear and open to abuse. The report, published on Monday (2 December), says that the directive — and thus the UK government's own regulations in the field — need amending. Clearer definitions of 'environmental information' and 'responsibilities relating to the environment' are needed, for example. □

European plans for patents

Paris. The European Commission last week adopted a 'plan of action' to encourage innovation in Europe, proposed by Edith Cresson, the research commissioner, Martin Bangemann, the industry commissioner, and Christos Papoutsis, the commissioner for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The plan contains, in particular, a reform of Europe's patent regulations, which will be proposed in detail in a green paper next year. Cresson complained last week that the cost of filing and maintaining a patent in eight member states costs ECU156,000, compared with just ECU17,000 in the United States. The costs and complexity of the system explained why two-thirds of Europe's SMEs held no patents, she argued. □

Spread of HIV gains pace

Geneva. The AIDS epidemic is still in its infancy, according to a report published last week from the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAids), which warns that the virus is spreading increasingly rapidly throughout Africa and Asia and into previously uninfected countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The report points out that sub-Saharan Africa is the most seriously affected region, where more than 1 in 20 people carry the virus. Complacency in the industrialized world over the threat of AIDS is criticized by UNAids director Peter Piot, who says that prevention of infection is the only hope for the whole world as the virus spreads into new areas and cases continue to multiply in others. This year, three million people have been infected with HIV and 1.5 million have died of AIDS. □

Tackling antibiotic resistance

London. The World Health Organization and the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Associations have agreed to collaborate on containing the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The partnership should help research and development into new antibiotics and cost-effective treatment of infections. WHO has established a global network for monitoring antibiotic resistance, and new funding will allow specific training to be provided in laboratories in China, Indonesia, Kenya, Mongolia, Thailand and Vietnam. African laboratories are already participating in the network. □

Targets for renewable energy

Brussels. Clear, ambitious and realistic targets to increase the contribution of renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, biomass and small-scale hydropower, to the energy balance of the European Union have been called for by a Green Paper published last week by the European Commission. At present, such sources only account for six per cent of energy consumption. Increasing this level would have a range of beneficial effects, including a significant reduction on carbon dioxide emissions, says the commission, which plans to publish a comprehensive strategy for renewable energy next year. □