

lished, as more than 12,000 copies of *INSERM Actualités* are distributed. She adds that whereas the summary of the report could be easily understood, the full report is highly specialized and could be misinterpreted by “people who don’t have the competence to understand it.” “There is a big risk in distributing a report of this nature to a wide population,” she says. “It poses a problem in terms of communication.”

But such arguments are viewed sceptically by the DRT. One official points out that publication of the report was agreed in its contract with INSERM, adding that the DRT “will not accept a unilateral decision taken by INSERM”. Moreover, while INSERM has played down the difference between making the report available and publishing it, the DRT considers the distinction is important.

One official from the DRT points out that as it stands the report is “grey literature”. This makes it more difficult for scientists elsewhere to obtain it, and risks downgrading its status. “The report must be confirmed by publication; not to do so would throw doubts on its validity,” particularly as its contents have been challenged internationally.

Indeed, the French ban, and the contents of the full INSERM report, have already been vigorously contested by the Canadian federal government, and the government of Quebec in particular (see *Nature* 385, 379; 1997). The French have been criticized for including chrysotile asbestos in the ban; the adequacy of extrapolations of toxicity to lower levels of exposure has also been challenged.

Failure to publish the report would “undermine” the series of measures taken by the government on asbestos, says the DRT official. These were partly justified on the basis of the report’s contents. The official claims INSERM’s handling of the report raises questions about its “independence” from its political masters. He said: “This is a very serious matter for us, it is shocking.”

Researchers involved in the preparation of the report are also unhappy. “It is the first time in my life that I have seen INSERM ask the question ‘should we publish or not a report that might not please the minister,’” says one. “It is of extraordinary gravity.”

One member of the scientific board of INSERM says the handling of the publication of the report has been “unusual”. “First we say that here we have independent scientific advice, and then we don’t publish it because of political reasons,” the researcher says, although acknowledging that the report is the most “politically explosive” INSERM has been asked to produce.

Observers point out that Griscelli, who is close to the neo-Gaullist RPR party and whose appointment was widely considered to be political, is in a vulnerable position as his post as director general has been in question since the Socialists came to power in the general election in June.

Declan Butler

## US energy official departs with a ‘get real’ warning

[WASHINGTON] The senior official responsible for environment, health and safety at the US Department of Energy leaves Washington this week with a warning for scientists: engage with the communities you live in, or face oblivion.

Tara O’Toole, a physician who has spent four years crusading against entrenched practices as an assistant secretary at the department, says scientists need to wake up to what is happening outside laboratory gates.

O’Toole played a key role in initiating a huge, cross-government investigation into the human subjects research that took place in the United States during the Cold War. More recently, she upset some scientists at the Brookhaven National Laboratory with her aggressive approach to environment problems there.

O’Toole practised and taught medicine in Baltimore, Maryland, and then worked on environmental health issues for the congressional Office of Technology Assessment before joining the administration. She was one of a cadre of radical officials sprinkled by President Bill Clinton across his first administration. As this group tires and departs — four years is considered a long time in such positions — it is being replaced, in general, by a more orthodox class of Washington official. O’Toole’s successor has yet to be named.

“We ‘baby-boomers’ just haven’t been realistic about how difficult it is to change the world,” O’Toole reflects. “I hope more people come forward to do this kind of work.”

Scientists need to accept that “the political process isn’t fair” and yet still engage with it, she argues. “It is very important that scientists get in the game. The community of scientists better do what needs to be done to assure the public that its programmes are properly run.”

O’Toole led the Department of Energy’s public response when a tritium leak was discovered at the Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, New York, earlier this year (see *Nature* 386, 3; 1997). The department responded with high-profile investigations into the management of the laboratory, and soon sacked its managing contractor, Associated Universities Incorporated.

Some scientists at the laboratory believe that the department overreacted, giving encouragement to critics who would like to see it shut down. Nick Samios, who retired as laboratory director in March, said at the time: “Tara is trying to be helpful, but it isn’t wise to constantly hold these press conferences. He noted that every one of them led to negative publicity for the laboratory.

O’Toole counters that the department



O’Toole: scientists must “get in the game”.

acted to save the laboratory from itself by piercing its complacency about the perceptions of people outside. She says she sympathizes with Brookhaven scientists “to some extent”, especially with graduate students whose projects were wrecked by the suspension of reactor-based research there.

“But the root problem was that scientists at Brookhaven were not engaged with the political realities of the community in which they live,” she says. “I don’t think they yet grasp the peril to the laboratory that is posed by the tritium plume — it isn’t a threat to public health, but it sure is to the laboratory.”

She also thinks that lessons learned at Brookhaven will eventually come into play for biology, as it comes to resemble ‘big science’. “The Human Genome Project is the beginning of ‘big biology,’” O’Toole says. “Science is no longer a cottage industry.” She predicts biologists engaged in big science will have to engage the public more effectively.

Energy department watchers say O’Toole will be sorely missed. “She was very thorough and committed and brought an incredible amount of technical knowledge to the job,” says one Congressional staffer.

Asked who will continue where she left off at the department, O’Toole replies dutifully that Federico Peña, the energy secretary, and his deputy and probable successor, Elizabeth Moler, “care about openness” and will continue to push for it. But neither Peña, a career politician, nor Moler, a Washington lawyer, is likely to upset the apple-cart at DoE in the manner of O’Toole or Hazel O’Leary, the previous energy secretary.

O’Toole’s specialized knowledge helped turn O’Leary’s vision of a more open department into reality — especially through the investigation into human subjects research, which eventually embraced the entire federal government. “They fought with the culture [of the laboratories], and it outlasted them,” says the staff member. “But they did make a difference.”

Colin Macilwain