News and Comment

PHS Radiation Report: Administration Finds That Delay in Publication Can Lead to All Sorts of Conclusions

After a 3-week delay imposed by the White House, the Public Health Service last week released the latest report of its National Advisory Committee on Radiation (NACOR). The report conformed to the rule that government documents, like burlesque queens, frequently are more interesting when under wraps. But the controversy surrounding the delay and the clumsy, hurried manner in which the report was finally released point up the fact that the government does not enjoy an abundance of public trust when it deals with the subject of the health hazards of nuclear fallout. Nor, it seems, does this widespread public skepticism foster a confident performance by administration officials who must deal with the problem. In its dual capacity of tester of nuclear weapons and surveyor of the hazards of the ensuing fallout, the government is easily cast in the role of Typhoid Mary playing health commissioner.

The gist of the report was that the government is laggard in radiation surveillance and countermeasure research and, through the Public Health Service, should undertake an expansion of these activities, rising from the present level of $16 million a year to $100 million in 1970. The NACOR findings and the budgetary recommendations were pretty much in line with those offered last year by the PHS's Committee on Environmental Health Problems. However, while the earlier study, which in large part reflected a 1959 report of the National Advisory Committee on Radiation, made only general recommendations, the NACOR report stressed deficiencies in fallout surveillance and called for the rapid development of countermeasures that could be used if radioactivity reaches levels that are considered dangerous.

The NACOR report sat well with the head of the PHS, Surgeon General Luther L. Terry, who would be a remarkable federal official, indeed, if he challenged a proposal to expand his agency. But the President, who is not shy about expanding federal activities, displayed a cautious lack of enthusiasm when he was asked about the report at last week's news conference. "I couldn't make a judgment on that yet," he said. "I think we ought to make, do more than we're doing, but we have not determined on our program as yet." His caution was not unexpected, for the NACOR report specifically, and the fallout hazard in general, present the Administration with a problem that seems to defy adroit handling.

Underlying the problem is the fact that, whoever looks at fallout, the inevitable conclusion is that it isn't good for you. The company parts way on the question of just how bad it is. But it is in the matter of fallout alone that the government departs from its traditional solicitude for public health and engages in an activity that it must acknowledge has unselective deleterious effects, if only on extremely small numbers. Its actions, therefore, are scrutinized by the press and the public, and any questionable move, such as the delay in release of the NACOR report, produces suspicions of deception and bad faith. These suspicions are fed by a thoroughly reasonable public loathing for the whole business of nuclear weaponry, coupled with uncertainties of the health hazards that are involved, and the difficulty of communicating to the public whatever is known about these hazards. For administration officials who must grapple with the problem of public understanding, the burden is epitomized by the mother who protests the health hazards of fallout, but fails to have her child vaccinated against polio.

NACOR, an outside consulting group appointed in 1958 by the surgeon general to advise the PHS on radiation problems, was asked last September to study the PHS's responsibilities in the field and to make recommendations for steps to carry them out. The study, which was made shortly after the Soviet atmospheric test series got under way, was decided upon by the PHS, but it was in harmony with the concern that the President and other Administration officials were voicing about the contamination that would result from the Soviet tests. In addition, the resumption of atmospheric testing was a suitable occasion for the PHS to reemphasize its case for an expanded role for its Division of Radiological Health, a circumstance that appears to have aroused the suspicions of some administration advisers when they speculated on the PHS's motives for bringing out the report.

Publication Delayed

The conception of the NACOR report thus occurred during the Soviet test series, but the report was ready for birth during the current American test series. A draft was circulated among various government agencies in early May, and when no adverse comment was forthcoming, a final version was scheduled for release on 16 May. Meanwhile, however, the President's science adviser, Jerome B. Wiesner, and some of his staff were taking a look at the NACOR report. It is beyond dispute that they did not like what they saw, but as with most matters involving the government and fallout, the motives for Wiesner's distaste are the subject of controversy.

The theory of some persons associated with the preparation of the report is that the Administration tried to suppress it because fallout is an extremely embarrassing subject for a government that is conducting nuclear tests. Unquestionably, it is an embarrassing subject, and it should be noted that the graphic language employed by the Administration in connection with the Soviet tests is, quite understandably, not employed in connection with the American tests. In urging a test ban last fall before the United Nations, Kennedy's references to nuclear fallout included "the poison of radioactive fallout," "polluting the atmosphere," and "contamination of the air," phrases that apply to all fallout, but which are not likely to be employed when one's own work is under discussion. But embarrassment, as an explanation for the report's delay, leaves some facts unaccounted for.

While the Administration visibly

shares a distaste for drawing attention to this country's production of nuclear fallout, it nevertheless can still point to convincing evidence that it has voluntarily spread some very unpleasant facts before the public. The most notable example of this was in the recent publication of "Health implications of fallout from nuclear weapons testing through 1961," a quite ugly report prepared by the Federal Radiation Council. The Council, which is part of the Executive Office, and therefore, unlike the PHS, is directly under the thumb of the Administration, concluded that the genetic effects of testing through 1961 "will certainly be considerably less than that occurring inescapably from background radiation," but then went on to offer numbers: In the United States, with which the report deals exclusively, leukemia cases attributable to fallout may total 2000 over the next 70 years, and bone cancer may total 700. The report is heavy with cautions that firm conclusions are difficult to sustain, but the figures that were offered, valid or not, inevitably were the high point of news accounts of the report, and they stand as a rebuttal to the charge that the Administration is trying to soft-soap the public on the health hazards of nuclear fallout. (The Radiation Council report will not end the controversy, but Wiesner, aware of the skepticism that greets government pronouncements on fallout, is said to have aimed for results that would be equally pleasing to Linus Pauling and Edward Teller. One person who helped prepare the report said it is unlikely that the Constitutional Convention experienced more haggling over words.)

Administration officials who had a hand in delaying the publication of the NACOR report contend that their objections had nothing to do with fear of embarrassing the government during a nuclear test series. The delay, they explain, was based on concern over what they considered to be a fast maneuver by the PHS to whip up congressional and public support for a larger budget. According to one administration aide, there is no doubt that the PHS should be given additional funds to expand its activities related to fallout, but the stated goal of $100 million a year by 1970 raises some serious questions about the relative importance of fallout as a threat to the American public. When mothers are concerned about iodine-131 in milk, the subject does not easily lend itself to rational public discussion, but against a heavy tide, Wiesner, with Kennedy's blessings, is trying to bring about some rational relationship between expenditure and need in the government's $10-billion-a-year research budget.

The argument is raised that with over $50 billion a year going into defense and nearly $1 billion going into surplus grain storage, surely there must be some money around to insure the safety of the public against the hazards of nuclear fallout. It is an appealing argument, but Wiesner's concern is whether the health hazards of fallout—which, while not fully understood, appear to be relatively minor as the hazards of the world go—warrant the large-scale program that has been staked out by the PHS. Furthermore, while the PHS is doing the bulk of the work on problems of human exposure, it is not alone in the overall field of radioactivity studies. The Atomic Energy Commission, the Agriculture Department, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Defense Department are also in the picture—at total annual expenditures estimated to exceed $50 million —but the NACOR report took no notice of their efforts.

Administration aides say that requests for specific information on what the money would be spent for—the NACOR report was quite general—accounted for the decision to hold up publication. While the PHS was drawing up its recommendations, rumors started to circulate that the Administration was sitting on the NACOR report, and suspicions arose that the report contained unpleasantries that the Administration would rather have unpublicized. This was followed by a leak to a newsletter and subsequent newspaper stories based on the leak, along with editorials demanding release of the report.

At this point, the White House apparently decided that more harm than good was coming out of the delay; late in the afternoon of Tuesday, 14 June, it told the PHS to go ahead and release the report, which the PHS swiftly accomplished, only to find that it had inadvertently brought down upon its head the wrath of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy. The Committee on that Tuesday afternoon was holding hearings on radiation standards. The hearings had been carefully prepared; in past hearings on this subject, as well as on other aspects of atomic energy, the committee had established itself as a leading forum for eliciting informed testimony. The educational services performed by the committee in the course of its hearings are considerable, and the publicity potential for its members is not to be overlooked.

In terms of news value, however, the testimony before the committee that day stood little chance of competing with the sudden release of the delayed NACOR report. This unfavorable turn of events produced paranoia symptoms among the committee members, some of whom remain unalterably convinced that events were carefully staged to their detriment. Congressman Melvin Price (D.–Ill.), who was presiding, angrily declared at the hearing that the release of the report was "an old trick" employed by the PHS to steal publicity, and he angrily demanded that Surgeon General Terry appear before him the next morning. Price's oral invitation was followed by a letter to Terry which told the surgeon general: "The unfortunate timing of the release was such as to supersede much of the fine testimony" before the committee. Price added that the committee had unsuccessfully sought a copy of the NACOR report before the hearings, and he noted: "I regard this development as a serious lapse in the legal obligation of the Public Health Service to keep the Joint Committee 'fully and currently informed' " as provided under the Atomic Energy Act.

Terry made a humble appearance the next morning, assuring the members of his deep affection for the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy and offering assurances that a careful investigation had revealed that the leak of the NACOR report had not originated in the PHS. He also explained that the first 20 copies run off the mimeograph machine were rushed to the office of the committee chairman, Chet Holifield, who, unfortunately, was away at the time. Holifield broke in to explain that the reports should have been left at the committee office, not his personal office; to which Terry courteously responded, "I was not aware of that technicality."

Terry went on to explain that it was his understanding that the report was held up by the Bureau of the Budget. It was suddenly released, he said, after he complained that the PHS was barraged by letters and telegrams demanding publication.

The Joint Committee then dropped the NACOR report and went about its

business. The report is now in the unloving hands of the Bureau of the Budget and the new Office of Science and Technology, which, together, can be expected to subject it to major surgery. When the results become known, the furor will be renewed, amidst the usual suspicions that the Administration is up to no good.—D. S. Greenberg

Notes: Science and Technology Office; Tobacco Advisory Committee

The Office of Science and Technology came into being last week and, as was expected, Jerome B. Wiesner, the President's science adviser, was nominated to head it.

Wiesner will also retain his presidential advisory post, a position that will permit him to continue as a confidential adviser to the president, free from congressional scrutiny. In his capacity as head of the new office, however, he will be available to testify before Congress on various issues involving relations between science and government. The appointment is subject to confirmation by the Senate, which will most likely involve Wiesner's appearance at a committee hearing. A date for his appearance has not been set, nor has it been determined which Senate committee will conduct the hearing: The position of deputy director of the office remains to be filled. The office was proposed under an executive reorganization procedure which becomes effective within 60 days unless voted down by either house of Congress. The proposal encountered no opposition.

The appointment of an "expert advisory committee" to evaluate findings on the health hazards of tobacco was announced last week by Surgeon General Luther L. Terry. Terry said the committee would "make whatever recommendations may be appropriate." The membership of the committee has not yet been announced, but it is expected to comprise representatives of government and nongovernment research organizations, and of the tobacco industry.

The study apparently reflected a desire by the Administration to move the government off center on the tobacco issue, without delivering too severe a jolt to the tobacco industry. At his news conference, Kennedy said the study would "take some months or go into 1963."—D.S.G.

Announcements

An **Institute for Theoretical Physics** has been established at Aspen, Colo., to promote "individual research and informal interchange of ideas." Administered by the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, the facility consists of ten two-man offices, a reading room, and a seminar room; experimentalists should attend during periods when they do not need equipment.

Individual participants provide their own salary by bringing their contract or fellowship with them. Housing accommodations, available at a reduced rate, will be arranged by the Aspen Institute. The 1962 sessions, which began this month, will run until 15 September. (Aspen Institute of Theoretical Physics, Aspen, Colo.)

A recent report from the Soviet news agency, Tass, lists a total of 404,000 **scientists** currently in the U.S.S.R.—40 times as many as there were under Czarist rule.

The National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo., will establish a **Scientific Balloon Flight Station** this summer at Palestine, Texas. Funded by the National Science Foundation, the $400,000 station will provide improved climatological conditions and trajectories for recovery of scientific payloads, on a temporary, year-round basis. Emphasis will be placed on difficult flights whose successful execution will advance balloon technology.

The 183-acre site, remote from established air lanes, will contain an operations and laboratory building and a 6½-acre concrete launching area, designed to accommodate all launching techniques, payloads, and balloons for land-based flights. Operation of the station will be administered by the NCAR Balloon Development Group, headed by Vincent E. Lally. Housekeeping and flight services will be supplied by private balloon contractors under NCAR supervision.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration has announced plans to establish a **Scientific and Technical Information Facility** in Bethesda, Md., for the control and dissemination of data relating to aerospace technology. The $1.2 million center, the first of its kind and size to be completely computer-oriented, will process the data on magnetic tape and distribute sets to each of the nine NASA centers throughout the country within 15 days of receipt of report. The facility will also issue indexed semimonthly abstract journals, and translations of all available U.S.S.R. and other world-wide technical aerospace reports. Scheduled to be in full operation this year, the center will be managed by Documentation Incorporated, Bethesda, Md., under the technical direction of NASA's Office of Scientific and Technical Information.

Courses

Advanced graduate or postdoctorate college teachers are eligible to attend a 6-week summer institute in **marine microbiology**, including unicellular algae, fungi, bacteria, yeasts, and viruses. The institute, supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation, is intended to acquaint scientists in other fields with the relation of marine microbiology to chemistry, oceanography, geology, and biology. Twelve grants are available to selected candidates. (Carl Oppenheimer, Institute of Marine Science, University of Miami, 1 Rickenbacker Causeway, Miami 49, Fla.)

A series of 1- to 4-week laboratory refresher-training courses in **communicable diseases**, including diagnostic, serologic, and typing methods, will begin on 10 September in Atlanta, Ga. Individual closing dates are approximately 1½ months prior to scheduled commencement of each course. (Laboratory Branch, Communicable Disease Center, U.S. Public Health Service, Atlanta 22, Ga.)

Meeting Notes

A **conference on low-level winds**, cosponsored by the American Meteorological Society and the U.S. Army Signal Missile Support Agency, will be held from 7 to 9 August at El Paso and Dallas, Texas. The El Paso program (7–8 Aug.) will cover theoretical techniques for analyzing and applying meteorological tower data, data acquisition and handling techniques, and sensor capabilities; and will include visits to White Sands Missile Range meteorological tower and wind tunnel facilities. On 9 August the University of Texas