

Organization arranged for a seven-member team to visit Naples in February. Chanock could not go, but two of his colleagues, Suffin and Prince, went in his place.

After reading the Italian reports, the visitors recommended that hospital staff physicians be given more training in infant care, that surveillance for signs of RSV in the community should be stepped up, that prompt autopsies should be encouraged (the hospital where most of the children died, according to one of the visitors, performed no autopsies in 1977), and that efforts to collect epidemiological data should be increased. They pointed out that breast-feeding seems to protect infants against some infections, and they suggested that health officials encourage the practice. Perhaps most interesting of all, they wrote: "We do not consider that steroids have any place in the treatment of respiratory virus infections, and their administration should be discouraged. We are not aware of any other therapeutic substance at present of value in the treatment of such infections."

That bit of advice was prompted by the fact that some parents were giving their sick children doses of corticosteroids, potent and hazardous hormones which can be bought without a prescription in Italy. It isn't clear whether the parents used the drug at their physicians' urging or simply decided on their own that steroid therapy would be good for baby. Few drugs are controlled in Italy except for narcotic painkillers, and one member of the group guessed that even these could be obtained without difficulty. He added that steroids seem to be consumed in much the same way that Americans eat exotic vitamins. One grandmother who brought a sick infant to the hospital had given the child five different medicines, including steroids.

The summer and autumn deaths in Naples may remain an unsolved mystery because of the lack of data. Baine, the epidemiologist from the Center for Disease Control, said the "only thing you can say about the cause of the encephalopathy is pretty inferential . . . it's kind of a puzzle." His personal hunch, which he would not dignify by calling an hypothesis, was that there may have been a hidden epidemic of some sort last summer which was undetectable "except that in a few people the association with the vaccination created some sort of encephalopathic phenomenon." This amounts to nothing but a guess, but lacking data, the experts probably will not come up with a better explanation of the mystery disease.—ELIOT MARSHALL

Stringent New Ethics Law Worries Government Scientists

"Mr. Ethics" offers reassurance

The federal science establishment has been thrown into a state that closely resembles panic by the new "ethics in government" act which takes effect on 1 July. Top-ranking government scientists widely regard the new law as a case of good intentions run amok, and several are thinking seriously about redesigning rather than bow to the stringent provisions in the ethics code. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph Califano recently asked President Carter to look into the matter and review its effect on employees in their departments.

Of particular concern is a conflict of interest provision that scientists fear will make them virtually unemployable outside of government if they don't get out soon. According to what is conceded to be the most extreme interpretation of the section titled "post employment conflict of interest," no agency head could take a job that would involve him in dealings with his former agency for 2 full years. For instance, National Institutes of Health (NIH) director Donald S. Fredrickson could not become the president or dean of any university that gets grants from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which is to say that for 2 years he could not take precisely the kind of job he would most likely be offered in academia. The same applies to Richard C. Atkinson, director of the National Science Foundation (NSF), who is on leave from Stanford University. Fredrickson and Atkinson are among those who feel they might be forced to resign. Food and Drug Commissioner Donald Kennedy, also on leave from Stanford, says he could lose many top-ranking FDA officials. Scientists in the Department of Energy, where one man already has resigned, are worried, as are people in the Department of Defense (DOD). Ruth M. Davis, deputy undersecretary of defense for research and advanced technology, recently joked that the new law may finally provide stability in government because "the old people can't get out and new people won't want in." Indeed, there is great concern that the law, which also contains a number of provisions for detailed financial disclosure, will discourage scientists from coming to Washington for periods of one to a few years, as has been common.

But things may turn out not to be as bad as they seem. "The law in this case does not speak for itself," says Bernhardt Wruble, director of the newly created Office of Government Ethics. Its full intent must be made clear through specific guidelines and regulations. Wruble, a presidential appointee and lawyer who happens to be an unknown—and therefore somewhat suspect—quantity to the science establishment, says that everyone's apprehension about the law is "greatly overblown."

[The new Office of Government Ethics is part of the also new Office of Personnel Management (OPM), successor agency to the Civil Service Commission. OPM is responsible for managing the recently enacted civil service reforms.]

In impromptu remarks made at a luncheon that OPM gave on 23 February for leaders in federal science agencies, Wruble, who is being called "Mr. Ethics," said that in writing the regulations his office is trying "to be fair and to make human adjustments" in implementation of the law. "We want to tone the act toward the real world," he said, declaring that it would be "absurd" to shape the law in a way that would cut off the government's supply of first-rate scientific talent.

Wruble's comments were plainly reassuring, but everyone present agreed that the proof lies in the regulations themselves. Although some scientists would like to see the law changed by amendment, additional action on Capitol Hill is unlikely. As a result, everyone is awaiting the final OPM decision with some apprehension. Wruble promises that it will be available for comment within a week or two and says he hopes no one will quit in the meantime.—BARBARA J. CULLITON