

ers, and the medical device industry have either established or stepped up their own programs. But they have all been subject to charges of bias.

The various plans differ in the type of information they gather. The AMA's new project will take an opinion poll of its members to evaluate a certain procedure or instrument. The AMA staff will review the scientific literature and compare its findings with the poll. As one HHS official says, "It's democratic, but it's not scientific."

At present, the program avoids the subject of cost. But according to one AMA official, that may change. The official says he is not sure how the association will fend off the same charge it leveled at the federal center—that it is dictating medical practice.

The American College of Physicians has set up a project that is more sophisticated than the AMA's. Its reports will be compiled from opinions garnered from various medical specialty organizations and a literature review. Their reports will be peer reviewed by members and non-members of the organization.

Blue Cross-Blue Shield has intensified its review program and is working closely with the American College of Physicians. On the basis of its own study, the company recently announced a major change in coverage that is expected to generate annual savings of several hundred million dollars. The company stated that respiratory therapy is administered much too often and unnecessarily. Under new policy it will pay for it only in limited circumstances. The Blue Cross position was endorsed by the American College of Physicians, the American College of Surgeons, and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The Institute of Medicine is also considering the idea of creating a health care panel, but discussions are very preliminary. The thinking is that the institute group would substitute for the federal center as a neutral body. But there is already grumbling from representatives of medical societies and insurance companies that ideas for the formation and specific duties of the panel are too nebulous.

Many policy analysts would like to see a federal center revived. Morris of national Blue Cross-Blue Shield says that it makes sense if only because the federal government is a major buyer of health care through Medicare.

A place is needed where all the groups can sit down and discuss health care issues, said one HHS official. "But there's no place to go right now."

—MARJORIE SUN

After the Shake-up at NSF

Donald N. Langenberg, who was asked to resign last month as deputy director of the National Science Foundation (NSF) to make way for a new management team, has been named chancellor of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. He will assume his new post on 1 February. Meanwhile, the National Science Board has established a search committee to look for Langenberg's replacement. The committee, which includes Edward A. Knapp, NSF's new director, will also recommend candidates for three other top NSF posts: assistant director for biological, behavioral, and social sciences, which is being vacated by Eloise E. Clark, who was also asked to resign last month; assistant director for mathematical and physical sciences, which is currently unfilled; and assistant director for astronomical, atmospheric, earth, and ocean sciences, which is currently filled by Francis S. Johnson, who is returning to the University of Texas (*Science*, 24 December, p. 1286). All four posts are presidential appointments, and thus the White House will make the final decision.—COLIN NORMAN

Stanford Patent Claim Is Put Under Wraps

Stanford University has decided to keep private its future discussions with the United States Trademark and Patent Office about a key gene-splicing patent application.

The application is based on the work of Stanley Cohen of Stanford and Herbert Boyer of the University of California at San Francisco. In August, it received a preliminary rejection from the patent office.

Because of wide interest in the matter, Stanford—unlike a majority of applicants—had previously made public the documents it submitted to the patent office. But apparently in response to bad press, the university is now going to be tight-lipped about its future responses to federal questions and objections to the patent claim.

Stanford complains that the rejection created "erroneous public impressions," according to Robert M.

Rosenzweig, university vice president of public affairs. He said that the rejection is a procedural step by which the patent office secures more information about the application.

Nevertheless, some patent lawyers, after reading the publicly available document that disclosed the grounds of the rejection, expressed doubt whether the patent could win approval. Their concern was heightened more recently by information contained in Stanford's appeal to the rejection (*Science*, 26 November, p. 868).

Rosenzweig said that the initial decision to open the file was "an experiment with some risks attached . . . in our judgment, the experiment has failed." The university, he said, will reopen the file for inspection after the patent office makes a final decision.

—MARJORIE SUN

Fallout from Nuclear Power in Space

The Defense Department's plan to build a new generation of compact nuclear reactors to power laser battle stations and other military satellites (*Science*, 17 December, p. 1199) has an ominous history. In 1964, a U.S. nuclear-powered satellite burned up on reentry and contaminated the atmosphere with plutonium. Unlike the breakup of a Soviet nuclear satellite over Canada in 1978, the U.S. accident received almost no publicity at the time. Moreover, a recent military-sponsored symposium on space nuclear power made no mention of the accident and its fallout.

The incident began on 21 April 1964 when a Transit navigational satellite was launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. On board was a power supply known as SNAP-9A, a radioisotope thermoelectric generator that was fueled with about 1 kilogram of plutonium-238. The rocket's engines failed in mid-flight, and the satellite and its lethal payload came crashing back into the atmosphere over the Indian Ocean.

Plutonium is one of the world's most toxic metals. Its radioactivity shows up in bones and lungs.

In 1964, search teams using sophisticated air sampling techniques