

been approved by the Technology Assessment Board) observes, however, that excess risks would be "difficult, if not impossible" to detect without actually doing the epidemiological survey, unless the excess was overwhelming. As a result, the OTA memo said, the NRC report is not helpful in deciding whether the survey should be performed.

The Veterans Administration has recently been directed by law to assess the need for a full-scale study of atomic veterans.

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

NIH to Review Policy of DNA Committee

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is undertaking a review of the policy guidelines that govern operation of its Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC). Questions about what RAC should or should not do crystallized several months ago when the committee met in closed session to consider two industry requests for permission to conduct certain experiments in genetic engineering (*Science*, 7 October, p. 35). It was the first time the RAC has shut its doors to the public. Justification of the closed meeting was made on grounds that proprietary data were being reviewed. NIH leaders are worried that the committee's credibility, which rests in large part on the fact that all its deliberations have been open, will be damaged if it decides to meet in secret again.

"The RAC is becoming de facto a regulatory body," NIH director James B. Wyngaarden said in an interview with *Science*. Technically, the RAC's guidelines for recombinant DNA research are mandatory only for laboratories that receive NIH funding but, in a spirit of cooperation mixed with self-interest, industry has agreed to voluntarily follow them as well. Thus, the RAC finds itself asked to review proposals from companies that want to conduct new experiments while also protecting trade secrets.

Wyngaarden has asked the RAC members to "study what its perimeter ought to be" in preparation for an open discussion of the issues at its

meeting next month. One option is to limit RAC review to proposals from NIH grantees. Wyngaarden is leaning toward that idea. However, its implementation, he notes, could lead to a proliferation of recombinant DNA committees in other federal agencies, including Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Administration. Whether such a proliferation would be desirable is among the questions that need to be debated. Also up for discussion is the possibility of establishing a recombinant DNA committee at a high level in the Department of Health and Human Services or of creating an interagency, government-wide RAC.—BARBARA J. CULLITON

Radioactive Seaweed Stirs U.K. Low-Level Waste Fight

The chairman of the company responsible for the operation of Britain's principal nuclear-fueled reprocessing facility admitted recently that "management misunderstandings" were responsible for the accidental discharge of radioactive solvent into the Irish Sea, and the subsequent contamination of 25 miles of coastline.

The admission by Con Allbay, chairman of British Nuclear Fuels, Ltd., came shortly after the British government announced that its scientists had discovered levels of radioactivity between 100 and 1000 times higher than normal in samples of seaweed taken from the coastline adjacent to the reprocessing plant at Sellafield (previously known as Windscale) in Cumbria.

In revealing these findings, the spokesman for the British Department of Environment in London added that, even though the public was being advised to avoid using the beach "for the time being," the risk of contamination from the seaweed was "extremely low" and that the levels of radioactivity were within safety limits.

Nevertheless, the evidence of higher than normal radioactivity has come at a particularly sensitive time, since the procedures used by the Windscale management to dispose of low-level radioactive waste from the plant are already being closely scrutinized by the British government. In particu-

lar, the Department of Environment is carrying out a formal investigation into the circumstances surrounding an incident in November, when a 200-meter stretch of the coastline had to be closed after a discharge of radioactive solvent, intended to be carried out into the Irish Sea, was washed ashore by an unexpected change in the current.

Pressure on the government to take increased security measures in the area around the Windscale plant had already been growing after a television program had claimed that the incidence of leukemia among young children in a village less than 2 miles from the plant was ten times higher than average. The program also claimed that similar excesses could be found in other villages nearby, even though no excess has been registered either for the total region, or for workers inside the plant.

The television program has reignited a fierce debate over the potential hazards of low-level waste disposal. Officials at BNFL claim that, given the company's adherence to international safety guidelines and the close monitoring of the local environment carried out by the National Radiological Protection Board, the fears raised by the television program were unjustified.

The charges made in the television program, as well as more general concerns about safety procedures at the reprocessing plant, have helped prompt several separate inquiries in addition to that announced by the Minister of Environment. These include one by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, and another being carried out by an independent team headed by a former president of the Royal College of Physicians.

Meanwhile, British Environment Minister Patrick Jenkins has ordered a separate scientific investigation into the safety of dumping low-level radioactive waste at sea, and has promised to suspend all attempts at such dumping until the results of the investigation become available. Jenkins' action was taken in response to growing opposition to sea dumping of wastes from Britain's labor unions, aided by environmentalist groups such as Greenpeace, which have so far successfully prevented any such dumping from being carried out. The government's report on the incident is expected to be released shortly.

—DAVID DICKSON