

department insists that "the data demonstrate clearly" that banned biotoxin weapons are still being used.

—ELIOT MARSHALL

OSTP Finally Gets a Deputy for Life Sciences

The Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) has finally filled the long-vacant post of deputy director for life sciences and regulatory affairs. The new occupant is Bernadine H. Bulkley, a cardiologist on the faculty of Johns Hopkins University and director of the Johns Hopkins Coronary Care Unit. She is the current president of the American Federation for Clinical Research and a member of the board of the American Heart Association.

The previous occupant, Denis Prager, resigned almost a year ago and the post has been filled since then on an acting basis by other OSTP staff members. The life sciences have not fared as well as the physical sciences and engineering in the Administration's budget proposals, and the long-standing vacancy at OSTP has been regarded as evidence of a lack of interest in the White House in biomedical affairs.—COLIN NORMAN

Interferon Patent Contest Kicks Off In Europe

What could become a nasty squabble over which companies gain patent rights to interferons made by gene splicing has begun. The initial contestants include Biogen and its large pharmaceutical partner Schering-Plough on one side and Genentech and Hoffmann-La Roche on the other. Both pairs of companies have been developing interferons as possible treatments for cancer and viral infections, but the European Patent Office has notified Biogen that it will receive a patent for alpha-interferon.

The patent, which is expected to be issued in several months, would grant Biogen exclusive commercial rights to the genetically engineered product in 11 European countries. Under the European patent system, the validity of a patent may be challenged during a 9-

month period following its issuance and Hoffmann-La Roche plans to challenge Biogen's rights. It will argue, in part, that the scientific literature shows Biogen scientists made a precursor to alpha-interferon, but the actual product was first made by genetic engineers at Genentech.

The breadth of the patent also will be disputed. Biogen has noted that the patent is to cover all alpha-interferons made by recombinant-DNA methods in bacteria, yeast, or animal cells. Disagreements over whether those different cell types produce the same or different products and over which research groups were first to succeed in using the different cells can be expected.—JEFFREY L. FOX

France Boosts Industrial Research

Paris. The French Council of Ministers gave its approval last week to an ambitious plan developed by the Minister of Industry and Research, Laurent Fabius, aimed at giving a substantial boost to the nation's industrial research. At present, France spends only 1.2 percent of its gross national product on research related directly to industrial needs, compared to 1.8 percent in the United States and West Germany.

Fabius's proposals fall into three categories. The first are aimed at improving the research training of engineers, and will include a doubling in the number of government awards made to researchers working on topics of industrial interest, particularly to small and medium-sized firms.

The second set of measures are intended to strengthen the links between industry and the research community. An extra \$75 million, for example, will be made available for funding industrially oriented research projects through the government's basic research agencies.

Finally, various steps will be taken to orient the activities of other government departments toward industry's research needs. For example, a major portion of the funds of the newly created Energy Saving Agency will be devoted to projects such as increasing the energy efficiency of automobiles, while tax rules will be liberalized to

allow companies a faster write-off of research expenses.—DAVID DICKSON

U.S. Officials Hail Progress in Chemical Weapons Talks

An apparent concession by the Soviet Union may have breathed some life into an international effort to negotiate a chemical weapons ban. The effort, which has been going on for 15 years under the auspices of the 40-nation Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, has repeatedly foundered on disagreements over treaty verification, with the United States demanding the right to inspect on a continuous basis Soviet chemical weapons destruction facilities, and the Soviets resisting this demand.

On 21 February, according to U.S. officials, Soviet ambassador Viktor Issraelyan said for the first time that his country would agree to the permanent presence of international inspectors at plants where chemical weapons will be destroyed. Previously, the Soviets had been willing to accept only occasional inspection. U.S. ambassador Louis Fields, his American counterpart, immediately hailed this as step forward that "creates the hope of progress." And President Reagan singled it out as "a good sign" in his nationally televised news conference on 22 February.

Arms control sources now say that these accolades may have been excessive, because—2 weeks after the Soviet ambassador's speech—they have yet to obtain an authoritative English language translation, and there is actually some uncertainty about whether he agreed to routine continuous inspection or merely listed it as one of several options to be used in special circumstances. The latter would only amount to a rhetorical flourish.

Nevertheless, the Administration has decided to put the best face on a new development in one of the few ongoing international arms control discussions. Later this spring, the Administration will unveil a new draft treaty, now being circulated for comment in Washington. But sources say that it will not contain any U.S. concessions on key verification issues.

—R. JEFFREY SMITH