Cancer Deaths Probed at Pasteur Institute

Paris

Concern is growing among research workers at the Institut Pasteur in Paris following the discovery of three cases of cancer—two of them fatal—among staff who had been working in two laboratories studying oncogenes and other mutagenic substances.

Last week the French authorities agreed to classify as an "occupational disease" the fatal cancer developed by a technician who had worked briefly in one of the two laboratories at the beginning of 1980. The decision came a week after the institute agreed to set up an independent inquiry into the three cancer cases, which will be led by a group of outside experts chaired by Jean Bernard, the president of the government's National Advisory Committee for Medical and Biological Sciences.

Officials at the institute say that the occurence of the three cases in researchers working in close proximity to one another could be a statistical coincidence. They point out that the laboratories involved both follow strict safety regulations for manipulating oncogenes and carrying out related experiments. Moreover, the technician who died, Yves Malpiece, worked in the laboratory for only 6 months, from December 1979 to May 1980, and the bone cancer (osteosarcoma) from which he suffered is not identical to the cancer that is said to have caused the death of the second research worker, Francoise Kelly, in May of this year. (Neither the identity nor the precise form of cancer suffered by the third researcher, who still works at the institute, has been revealed.)

Others argue, however, that the possibility that the cases resulted from exposure to a carcinogenic agent in the laboratories cannot be ruled out. And the debate has been fueled by unconfirmed reports at the end of last week that a fourth case of cancer had been diagnosed among the same group of individuals.

The commission of inquiry, which has been set up by the director of the Pasteur Institute, Raymond Dedonder, is now faced with the task of deciding whether any causal link can be established between working conditions in the laboratory and the relatively high incidence of cancers among the research staff.

It will also investigate claims made by some reseachers that pressure to fulfill commercial contracts, for example, for the mutagenicity testing of new chemical compounds, might have led to a relaxation of safety standards. The Pasteur Institute has in the past refused to make public precise information about the nature of several of these studies, claiming that to do so would infringe the secrecy desired by its industrial clients.

Institute officials have also been reluctant to confirm or deny claims that the total number of cancers may be higher than three, arguing in this case that to divulge such information would be wrong, "for obvious reasons concerning the freedom of the individual and medical secrecy."

Last week's decision to characterize Malpiece's death as the result of an "occupational disease"—which overturned a previous rejection of such a request that had been made by his family—does not itself establish a causal connection, since the decision was reached primarily on the circumstantial grounds that Malpiece had been working with radioisotopes.

Nevertheless, the decision has made it more difficult for the committee of inquiry to conclude that there is no case to answer. And it has also strengthened demands from labor unions representing laboratory staff for a full investigation of safety procedures at the institute. ■ **DAVID DICKSON**

Chilean, U.S. Scientists Given AAAS Awards

A group of Chilean physicians and the founder of the Society for Social Responsibility in Science (SSRS) were given the annual Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award of the AAAS at the annual meeting last month.

The Colegio Medico de Chile, established in 1947, has become increasingly active in the past few years in efforts to stop government-sponsored torture. It has initiated internal investigations of physicians allegedly involved in the abuse of political prisoners, and has formulated guidelines to discourage professional complicity in torture.

The other award recipient was Victor Paschkis, an Austrian-born scientist who in 1940 established a computer analog laboratory for heat flow and diffusion studies at Columbia University. According to the AAAS committee, Paschkis took the "unprecedented action" of refusing to take research contracts for work that he considered socially destructive. In addition to founding the SSRS in 1947, he influenced the formation of sections on technology and society in various engineering societies, and initiated what may have been the country's first course on technology and society at Columbia in 1965. ■ **CONSTANCE HOLDEN**

U.S.–China Exchanges Accentuate Sciences

Chinese students and scholars coming to the United States under the revived U.S.–China educational exchange program have been concentrated heavily in science and other technical disciplines. A new report* on the exchanges indicates that well over two-thirds of those sponsored by government were in the physical, life, health, or computer sciences, mathematics, and engineering. More than half were in the physical and life sciences.

The report notes that the choice of disciplines reflects the emphasis on science and technology by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The rapid buildup in the numbers of students and scholars coming here is said to have made the exchanges an important element in China's effort at modernization.

The report, which covers the years 1978 through 1984, puts the number of students and scholars that came to the United States between 1979 and 1983 at about 19,000. During the 1983–1984 academic year alone some 12,000 were here. About half the students and scholars being sent abroad are coming to the United States.

The number of American students and scholars going to China under the exchanges has been substantially smaller and their academic fields sharply different. An estimated 3500 Americans participated in the exchanges during the period of the study. A majority pursued short-term language study. Of those who conducted research, some two-thirds were in the social sciences and humanities.

The report was done for the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, which operates under the joint sponsorship of the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Academy of Sciences, and the Social Science Research Council. Study director for the project was Ohio State University political scientist David M. Lampton.

In addition to presenting data from studies on the exchanges, the report examines a number of issues raised by the program. One finding was that stipends received by many Chinese students from their government were inadequate. Low stipends were said to "promote group living that hinders English language acquisition and encourages cultural isolation" and limits the students' educational activities. ■

JOHN WALSH

**A Relationship Restored: Trends in U.S.–China Educational Exchanges 1978–1984*. National Academy Press, Washington, D.C. $19.95.