Briefing:

Breuning's Accuser Has Grant Deferred

The scientist who spurred the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) fraud investigation of psychologist Stephen Breuning (*Science*, 27 March, p. 1566), has received notice that the renewal of his NIMH grant has been deferred. Robert L. Sprague of the University of Illinois says that after 17 years of continuous support from NIMH, he was notified on 3 March that the renewal was being deferred by the National Advisory Mental Health Council, despite the fact that the initial review group (IRG) gave the application a healthy priority score of 150. The IRG unanimously recommended 2 years' additional support.

The Council told Sprague it wanted the grant re-reviewed in view of concerns raised by the IRG, and invited him to submit "clarifying information." Sprague, whose research involves the effects of antipsychotic drugs on the mentally retarded, has had to close down his project as of 31 March. The earliest date for reconsideration of the application is in May.

Breuning, who did some research under Sprague's contract, was found to have engaged in "serious scientific misconduct," according to a draft NIMH report that has not yet been released. The NIMH panel chided Sprague for "failure to adequately oversee the subcontract. . . ." But it commended him for bringing the matter to NIMH's attention and concluded that Sprague "had behaved appropriately in reporting his suspicions of Dr. Breuning's research and that Dr. Breuning's work did not impact on Dr. Sprague's research."

Eleanor C. Friedenberg, deputy director of the NIMH Division of Extramural Activities, says the decision to defer the grant renewal has nothing to do with the Breuning affair. ■ **C.H.**

Shake-up Planned for British Universities

Britain's conservative government has promised that, if it wins the next general election, it will introduce major changes in the way the nation's state-funded universities are administered and financed, in an attempt to make them more directly responsive to the nation's economic and industrial needs. The changes were announced in a policy statement issued last week by Kenneth Baker, the secretary of state for education and science.

The University Grants Committee, which currently distributes government funding with few strings attached to individual universities according to a formula based largely on student numbers, will be replaced by a University Funding Council.

Individual universities will apply to the new council for funding on a "contract" basis, and one of the criteria used to judge applications will be the extent to which the undergraduate courses and research programs are considered appropriate to national needs. In addition, the number of industrialists and nonacademics on university councils will be increased.

The policy statement says it is important to protect spending on basic research. However, its main message is that, in the future, the major content of both teaching and research in universities should be determined by the needs of industry, rather than the dictates of academe. ■ **D.D.**

Roe Floats a Plan for University Facilities

Legislation that would provide $2.5 billion over the next 10 years to build and refurbish university research facilities has been introduced by Representative Robert Roe (D–NJ), the chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology. The legislation (H.R. 1905) is cosponsored by 13 of Roe's colleagues on the science committee, which should at least guarantee it some attention.

The measure would establish a program within the National Science Foundation that would award grants "on the basis of merit after a comprehensive review." Universities would have to raise at least an equal amount from nonfederal sources. The legislation would authorize $250 million a year over 10 years, and a minimum of 15% would be set aside for universities and colleges that received less than $10 million in total federal R&D funds in each of the two previous years.

Legislation introduced by Roe's predecessor, Don Fuqua (D–FL), was received with less than total enthusiasm by the universities because it would have funded facilities in part by taking money from other federal R&D programs. Roe's bill, which would in theory establish the new program as an addition to NSF's budget, may be more palatable. Steven Muller, president of Johns Hopkins University and chairman of the Association of American Universities, has welcomed the bill and indicated that the AAU may put its weight behind the measure. ■ **C.N.**

Animals Can Be Patented

A 3 April ruling by Board of Patent Appeals and Interferences of the United States Patent and Trademark Office appears to have cleared the way for the patenting of animals with unique, man-made characteristics that do not occur in nature. The decision was contained in a ruling on a patent application for a 30-chromosome variant of the oyster *Crassostrea gigas*, which normally has 20 chromosomes.

The modification is designed to overcome a souring in the sweet taste of the organism's meat that occurs during the summer reproductive period. But the board upheld a patent examiner's finding that this sterile oyster did not qualify for a patent because it was not unique. It noted that another 30-chromosome variant had been developed previously with different oyster variety, *C. virginica*.

At the same time, citing the broad language of the 1980 Supreme court decision in *Diamond v. Chakrabarty*, the board overturned the examiner's reasoning that the oyster also could not be patented under federal law because it is a higher organism. Until now, the patents have been granted to plants and microorganisms, but not to higher life forms. The decision is not a total surprise. In a series of recent public forums, one patent official official, Charles E. Van Horn, has observed that the legal basis for the agency's position was weak. In the landmark Chakrabarty ruling, he has stressed, the court ruled that Congress intended that " . . . anything under the sun that is made by man" could be patented.

The immediate effect on industry is unclear. However, the decision will be important in the long run for recombinant DNA and traditional breeding applications, according to industry officials who are still studying the decision. ■ **M.C.**

Britain Signs Space Accord with U.S.S.R.

Britain and the Soviet Union have signed a 10-year agreement to cooperate in several fields of space science and technology. Areas to be covered by the agreement, which was signed during Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to Moscow last week, include solar and terrestrial physics, planetology, high energy astrophysics, materials science, and space biology. The agreement includes exchange of information between space scientists in the two countries; cooperation in the implementation of joint projects to develop, build, and launch equipment; and the organization of symposia. ■ **D.D.**