Letters

NIH Drug Tests

Constance Holden's article, "NIH scientists balk at random drug tests" (News & Comment, 12 Feb., p. 724), contains a series of one- and two-word quotes, attributed to me, which are presented out of context and woven into the story so that they create an inappropriate, adversarial, and inflammatory sentiment which I neither voiced nor do I hold. I have always had great respect for my scientific colleagues at the National Institutes of Health, and I can certainly understand the feelings that have been generated on this issue. The two principal points I attempted to convey in the interview were (i) that the "scientific and technical" aspects of the federal drug program are well documented (*1*) and that concerned individuals should review these materials and understand the procedures and safeguards that have been provided, and (ii) that the President's Executive Order for a Drug-Free Federal Workforce (*2*) *requires* the heads of Executive departments to implement drug-testing programs and is not discretionary.

The problem of drug abuse in America and the "appropriate" way in which to deal with this problem is a complex and emotionally charged subject. My views on the issue are well documented (*3*) and support any substance abuse policy which manifests a basic philosophy of getting the substance-abusing employee into treatment and back on the job. The membership of the AAAS would be better served by accurate information, not rhetoric, to help employers, workers, and unions continue developing and refining ideas about these difficult issues.

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Response: I am sorry Walsh did not like the things I quoted, as I certainly respect him and his commitment to carry out the President's order. However, I believe I accurately conveyed the tone of the interview in which he sounded distinctly frustrated at scientists' opposition to the drug-screening program (he did not, for example, tell me he certainly understood the negative feelings that have been generated).—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

The Windscale Legacy

I should like to amplify one crucial interpretation stressed in David Dickson's excellent article about the importance of the release of the original official papers on the 1957 Windscale nuclear accident (News & Comment, 5 Feb., p. 556). I should also like to comment on the representation in the article of the polonium-210 release.

On the latter point, although the presence of polonium-210 is not mentioned in the Penny Report, released in sanitized form in November 1957, 1 month after the accident, it is mentioned in two papers published in 1958 by U.K. Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) staff scientists (*1, 2*).

What is curious is the way in which mention is made. Dunster *et al.* (*2*, p. 300) state:

> In order to give an appreciation of the magnitude of the accident which occurred it is necessary to provide estimates of both the amount and

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nature of the radioactivity released. These estimates are based on the survey measurements made in the district together with sampling of the material found in the exhaust filters subsequent to the incident.

The principal fission product released was iodine-131. Smaller quantities of other fission products such as caesium-137, strontium-89 and -90, ruthenium-103 and -106, zirconium-95, niobium-95 and cerium-144 together with polonium-210 were also released.

The reference to polonium reads as though it were an appended afterthought.

Dunster, then a UKAEA scientist, later became the director of the U.K. National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) set up in 1970. It remains a mystery as to why the importance of polonium was not emphasized in the NRPB's own reevaluation of the 1957 accident, published 13 years later in their report (*2*) of February 1983.

Another important matter to stress is why the then British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan (later Lord Stockton) judged it crucial to gain the support of the U.S. Congress for the amendments to the 1954 U.S. Atomic Energy Act. Britain wanted access to U.S. pressurized water reactor propulsion technology. It also wanted a backup testing site in addition to Australia and the Christmas Islands for its own nuclear warheads and highly enriched uranium for military use. The resultant Anglo-American Mutual Defense Agreement (MDA) on Atomic Energy Matters (*4*) provided the basis for the 1962 Nassau Polaris agreement and the 1980 Trident agreement and permitted the export from Britain to the United States of at least 7000 kilograms of plutonium of civilian origin for use in U.S. Department of Energy weapons programs. The vast proportion of this was exported between 1964 and 1969 and constituted about 96% of the total plutonium production in civil Magnox reactors over the period.

Another recent release under the "30-year rule" shows that the UKAEA Chairman Edwin Plowden actually suggested in a meeting of the U.K. cabinet defense committee on 2 August 1957 that an assessment be made to judge "the extent to which nuclear weapons programmes could be accelerated by the diversion of the fissile material devoted to civil purposes."

A year later, in June 1958, the national British electricity utility, the Central Electricity Generating Board, agreed to a request by the Ministry of Defense to modify its civil Magnox reactors to provide for military plutonium production. This came after the 5-month-long amendment hearings (*5*) (from January through May 1958) in the U.S. congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy to ensure that the MDA be completed.

One long-term political fallout effect of this complex atomic diplomacy of 30 years ago is that the British government still refuses to publish plutonium production figures for its civil Magnox reactors. The legacy of military secrecy pervades to the present, creating continued suspicion.

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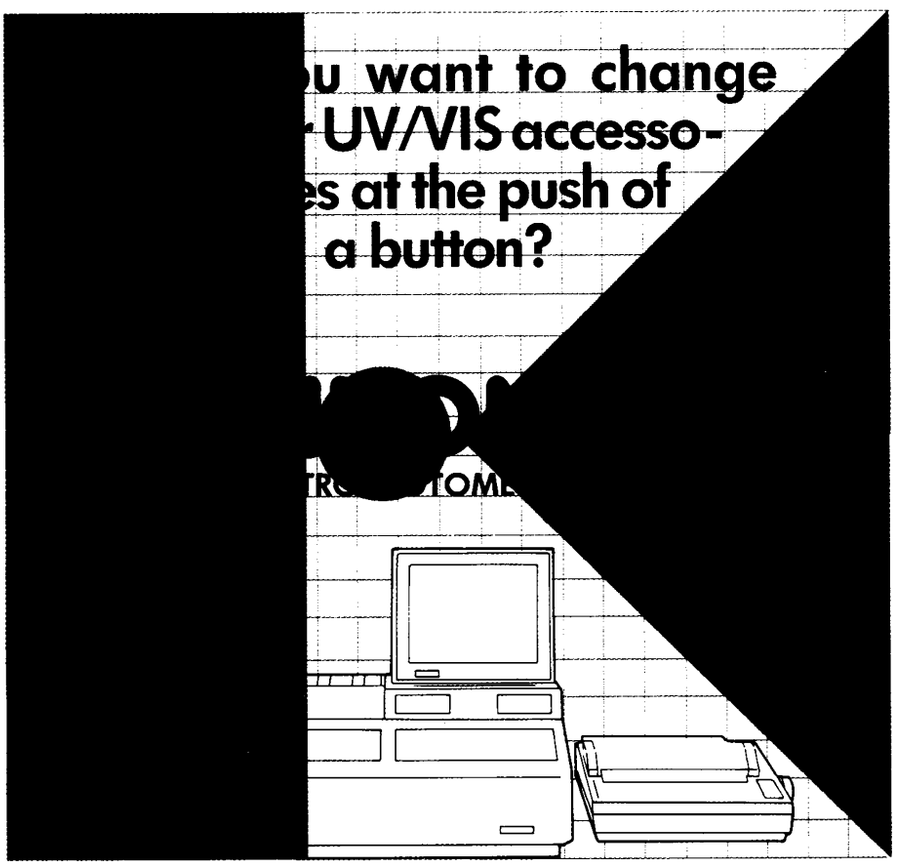

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