

it asks. Among those that have been prepared for Bromley are these:

- International competitiveness. Is it a serious problem? How should the United States respond.

- The environment. What are the true dimensions to the problem of global warming? What are the realistic options we have for fighting back?

- East-West military tensions have been reduced recently. What does this mean for military R&D in this country? Will we need less? Or, will we need more research to remain technologically on top even if we have fewer weapons?

- Conflict of interest. The times they are a-changing and there is increasing concern about the independence of scientific research and advice. What should today's standards be?

- High technology. What does the future hold in superconductivity? In high definition television?

- The infamous infrastructure. There are signs that America's laboratories are physically wearing out and that equipment is becoming obsolete. Will there be money to reverse the decay?

When rumors of Bromley's appointment first circulated in Washington months ago, there was some grousing that he lacked the experience and political connections to have much power in the inner circles of the White House. His very formal manner was called arrogance by some, while others said he is too conservative for the liberal majority in science. However, now that he is on the verge of confirmation, the private grumbling appears to have ceased.

■ BARBARA J. CULLITON

Benveniste Criticism Is Diluted

Jacques Benveniste, the French biologist who last year rocked the scientific community when *Nature* published his paper concluding that water could "remember" the shape of molecules in high dilutions, has come close to having his research on the topic shut down. The Scientific Council of the National Institute for Health and Medical Research (INSERM), where Benveniste works, recommended earlier this month that he be told to cease and desist. But last week, INSERM director Philippe Lazar offered Benveniste a reprieve.

Lazar gave Benveniste 6 months to look into possible bias and other errors in his dilution studies, after which Lazar will decide whether to reappoint him to another 4-year term as head of his research group. In rejecting the scientific council's recommendation, Lazar said he did not want to stifle research on new ideas and he implied that Benveniste had been badly treated by *Nature*.

The way INSERM's scientific council saw it, Benveniste's group should drop the dilution studies immediately and concentrate on its widely respected research on the immunological aspects of allergies and inflammation. It also recommended that Benveniste be told to stop talking to the mass media on what has become popularly known as "the memory of water." The council, whose evaluation team included two foreign scientists, Henry Metzger of the National Institutes of Health and A. B. Kay of the National Heart and Lung Institute in London, said that the worldwide controversy raised by the *Nature* article not only appears to have dented the research group's own scientific reputation but has also harmed "the image of INSERM and more generally the impact of the French

scientific community."

But Lazar appears to criticize *Nature* for the way it handled the controversy. In a letter to Benveniste, Lazar cites *Nature*'s behavior toward Benveniste as "attenuating circumstances" in deciding whether any sanctions should be taken. *Nature* submitted Benveniste and his research team to a highly public grilling after publishing his paper. And, in the first public comment by any French official on the whole affair, Lazar refers to what he describes as the "strange" composition of the team that the journal sent to investigate Benveniste—it included professional magician James Randi and NIH fraud-buster Walter Stewart, along with *Nature* Editor John Maddox—and "the questionable ulterior justifications of the journal concerning its real motives" in pursuing Benveniste.

In his letter, Lazar says: "Your priority must be a systematic search for the experimental bias which may up to the present have escaped you, and which can apparently explain your unusual claim." Lazar says that such a course of action "would not be criticized by your scientific peers because it corresponds to the very essence of scientific thought."

Although told by Lazar not to speak to journalists about the affair, Benveniste wrote in the newspaper *Le Monde* last week that the phenomena he reported in the *Nature* paper have been confirmed by two other teams in France, two in the United States, and one in the Soviet Union. "Some of these foreign groups are planning to carry out tests on man in collaboration with pharmaceutical companies," he claimed.

■ DAVID DICKSON

Microfilm Thieves Hit University Libraries

Microfilm records of U.S. patents are mysteriously disappearing from university libraries around the country. The University of Massachusetts was the first victim to detect a theft at the end of June, and 11 other libraries have since discovered they've been hit. The thieves, who have so far walked off with hundreds of reels of microfilm—as many as 237 from just one library—appear bent on obtaining a complete record of U.S. patents for the past 20 years.

A 6 July memo from the Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) describes the thefts as "a most serious situation," and says "the extent of the problem is growing daily and has now reached alarming proportions." There is little or no overlap in the reels stolen, suggesting a planned operation.

The targeted libraries are part of the Patent Office's Patent Depository Library program, which has 65 libraries in 41 states. Jaia Barrett, assistant executive director of the Association of Research Libraries, says the thefts have baffled everyone.

"There's no logical explanation that I've been able to come up with," she says. "We've been hearing a lot of speculation." One possibility is that the film could be used in conjunction with an index of patents on CD ROMs that will soon be available from the patent office. Coupled with the index, the microfilm would make a powerful tool for patent searches.

The FBI has begun an investigation, but a spokesman for the agency says it is not clear what federal laws have been broken.

None of the material is classified. Anyone interested can obtain the microfilm from Research Publications, Inc., of Woodbridge, Connecticut. But cost—a complete set of microfilm for the past 20 years would fill up about 3000 reels and would cost approximately \$100,000—may have prompted what department store detectives like to call five-finger discounts.

Rice University has identified two men who were seen in the library together one afternoon as possible suspects. They are described as being in their late 20s or early 30s, casually dressed, and carrying large, brown attaché cases.

The libraries hit so far are: University of Massachusetts, Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Maryland, Rice University, University of New Mexico, University of Utah, Georgia Tech, Texas A&M, University of Texas, University of Idaho, Ohio State University, and the University of Michigan.

■ JOSEPH PALCA