Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

New Lease on Life for Dahlem Meetings

The Dahlem Conferences, threatened with certain death from loss of funding, have won a reprieve—for at least the next 4 years. The week-long scientific meetings, held four times a year in West Berlin, are small, tightly organized multidisciplinary workshops. Described by one prominent participant as "canonically Teutonic," the conferences are valued for the free exchange of ideas they promote and have attracted a swelling band of devotees over the past 15 years.

But last year the group of industrial donors that was the major source of funds withdrew, and Dahlem director Silke Bernhard thought she might have to close down (*Science*, 14 July 1989, p. 122). But a change in the political color of West Berlin's senate—to a red-green coalition of socialists and environmentalists—has saved the day.

The new coalition is much more favorably disposed to the meetings than its conservative predecessor and West Berlin mayor Walter Momper, possibly swayed by letters of support from more than 200 Dahlem alumni, has guaranteed DM 1 million ($600,000) of the DM 1.4 million a year needed to keep the conferences going. The German Science Foundation and other donors will make up the difference.

Bernhard and her team are now organizing this year's meetings. Subjects? Coastal zones, new approaches to neurological disorders, and how to reduce global carbon dioxide emissions.

Layoffs Hit Draper Laboratory

Cutbacks in defense research are forcing the Charles Stark Draper Laboratory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to lay off 145 researchers, engineers, and support personnel.

The layoffs are to take place over the next 10 months. The primary reason is the impending completion of a program to develop the guidance system for the Trident II missile.

A spokeswoman said that some layoffs were anticipated as a result of the end of the 8-year program. The laboratory had hoped to offset them with new contracts from the Department of Defense, but these have not been forthcoming.

Protecting Progress

Last year, primate researcher Ronald W. Wood of New York University got a nasty surprise when a reporter gave him a detailed critique of his as yet unpublished research on the behavioral toxicity of industrial solvents. The critique was performed by a group called Trans-Species Unlimited, which has frequently attacked Wood for his use of macaques in inhalation experiments involving commonly abused solvents.

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Ronald W. Wood

And where had Trans-Species Unlimited obtained the details of Wood's unpublished work? From his progress report to the sponsoring agency—the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)—by the simple expedient of a Freedom of Information Act request.

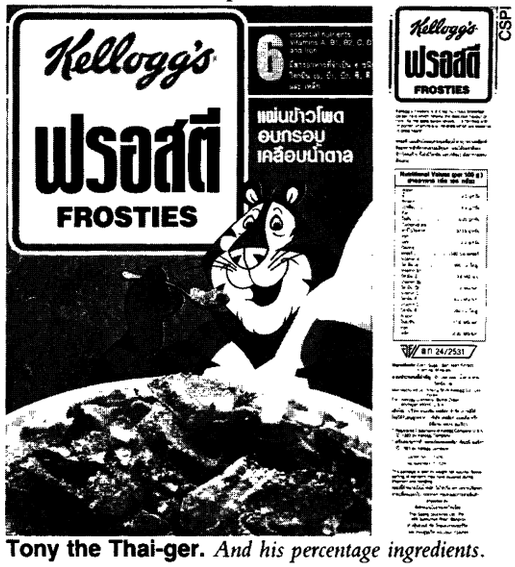
Now, however, it should be more difficult for anyone to repeat the animal rights group's feat. Lawyers for the Public Health Service have determined that unpublished research material is covered by a section in the Freedom of Information Act exempting "financial or commercial information that is privileged or confidential."

The change in policy—which has yet to be tested in court—was implemented several months ago when an animal rights group in Ohio put in an Information Act request for progress reports on research by Robert D. Wilkerson of the Medical College of Ohio. Wilkerson does NIDA-funded research on cocaine toxicity using dogs. He protested that much of the information should not be released because it was unpublished.

The Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA) therefore denied the request. The issue never came to a head because the group did not appeal the decision. However, ADAMHA spokesman Jim Helsing says that in the case of future requests of this nature, the government won't release unpublished information until researchers have had the chance to publish their data.

What's in the Bowl?

In several international health controversies—infant formula, for example—it seemed multinational corporations were applying lower standards in the developing countries than they did at home.



Tony the Thai-ger. *And his percentage ingredients.*

In some cases, however, the shoe may be on the other foot. For instance, people in Thailand know more about what's in their morning cereal than we do. And the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nutrition lobby group, wants to know why.

In Thailand most processed foods, including many well-known American products, list percentages of all their major ingredients. Consumer groups here have been trying for years to get the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to require that kind of percentage ingredient labeling to supplement existing nutrition labeling.

But, says the center, food manufacturers have rejected the idea, in part because it means even minor ingredient changes would require new labels. A 1979 FDA study also warned that manufacturers might see such a ruling as "an intrusion upon trade secrets and product recipes."

Going Where Nukies Fear to Tread

He may lack the charm of R2-D2, but Simon, the new robot at the Savannah River plant in South Carolina, has compensating virtues. For one thing, Simon is willing to slip into hot radiation zones and observe nuclear reactor vessels while they are running.

European Weather Forecasters Get One Right

It was an unlikely rematch. Little more than 2 years after being drubbed by a once-in-a-lifetime storm, Europe faced an equally powerful storm last month. British forecasters had particular reason to be uneasy, having blown the prediction of the October 1987 storm that ripped through southern England with winds gusting to more than 160 kilometers per hour (*Science*, 11 March 1988, p. 1238).

This time, British forecasters were on top of the situation. Instead of issuing a few hours' warning, they alerted the populace more than a day ahead. Lessons learned in 1987 may have helped. Computer forecast models are now run on a schedule allowing inclusion of the latest, most crucial data. The models are not allowed to assume more about the present weather than is prudent. And the Meteorological Office has a new computer eight times as powerful as the one used for predictions in 1987. Forecasters also got a break—"this was a better behaved storm" in terms of predictability, notes a Met Office spokesman.

Reuters/Bettmann Newsphotos

After the storm. *Scene on London's Victoria Embankment.*

But despite that, 38 people died in Britain in the recent storm (as opposed to only 17 in 1987). This time the high winds covered a larger area and struck during the day when more people are outside.

Engineers at Savannah River, the U.S. production site for plutonium and tritium used in nuclear weapons, have spent the past 4 years developing and training Simon to do what they cannot. They would like to monitor reactors in operation rather than shutting down the entire works, as they do now, for several days of cooling to let humans approach.

Simon is shielded with lead and fitted out with high-intensity lights and a Cyclopean television eye. It has radiation detectors to measure neutrons and gamma rays, temperature gauges, radio and microwave transmitters, and four computers to aid in data analysis and navigation.

Simon can seek out power and data outlets on the walls by itself, sucking in electricity for its batteries and fresh information as it roams through hot passageways. If all goes as planned, Simon will be put to use at Savannah River next year. Future generations may be developed for commercial nuclear plants.

Savannah River Site

Simple Simon. *He's "hot."*

U.S.–Soviet Diabetes Project

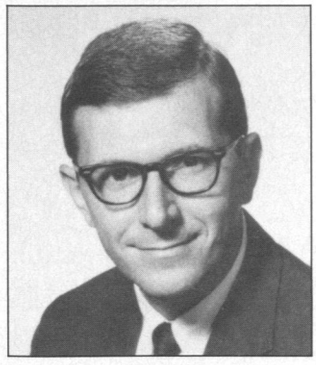
A collaborative diabetes project, billed as "the most extensive joint health care project ever undertaken by the United States and the U.S.S.R.," was officially launched in Moscow on 22 January.

The 5-year agreement is between the International Diabetes Center (IDC) in Minneapolis, the world's leading center for diabetes education and training, and the Soviet health ministry's Central Institute for Advanced Medical Studies.

The Soviets have designated diabetes as one of their major health problems. It is aggravated by shortages of insulin and disposable syringes and by difficulties in dietary management because of chronic food shortages.

A team from Minneapolis flew to Moscow last month to conduct 2 weeks of training for professors and physicians from around the Soviet Union. The collaboration will also include clinical research, the development of educational materials, and faculty exchanges.

Ultimately, according to the IDC, the Soviets want to "build a major international diabetes center in Moscow which mirrors the one in Minneapolis."



Patent Court Gets First Scientist

An organic chemist, Alan D. Lourie, has been nominated by President Bush to serve on the special federal circuit court that hears appeals on patent cases. Lourie, also an attorney, is currently vice president for corporate patents and trademarks at SmithKline Beckman Corporation.

Members of the pharmaceutical industry have hailed the nomination which was promoted by the Industrial Biotechnology Association. Senate confirmation is expected.

Room at the Top

At what many observers find a frustratingly slow pace, the White House is filling the remaining vacancies in the science policy hierarchy. On 19 January President Bush announced the nominations of William D. Phillips and Eugene Wong to the two empty associate director posts at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Phillips most recently served as president of the Missouri Advanced Technology Institute, but he has divided the bulk of his nearly 40-year professional career between two chemical industry giants: Du Pont and Mallinckrodt.

Wong is an electrical engineer who has been on the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley since 1962.

Word is that another nagging vacancy is about to be filled. Robert Marshall White, vice president for research and development at Control Data Corporation, is expected to be nominated as undersecretary of commerce for technology, a new post created to provide direction for civilian technology policy. The Administration has had a devilish time trying to find someone with the right industrial and demographic qualifications, and despite being a top priority, the post has taken more than a year to fill.