## Poles Plug In

As the Iron Curtain crumbles, an international health communications group based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has announced an agreement to transmit medical information by satellite between England and Poland.

The organization, SatelLife, founded by Harvard cardiologist Bernard Lown, says this is "the first medical information retrieval service to use direct satellite transmission." The new Anglo-Polish Medical Information Service was established by an agreement between the Polish Central Library and the library of the British Medical Association. Eventually every medical academy and institute in Poland will be able to plug into a network of small satellite dishes receiving data from the privately owned Pan-American Satellite-1.

## British Brain Drain

"British scientific research is being starved of the necessary funding, with the consequent emigration of many scientists like ourselves." So says a petition signed by 1600 British scientists abroad and presented to Margaret Thatcher last week to prove to her government that there really is a "brain drain" from the United Kingdom.

To British postdocs working in U.S. universities, the reasons for the drain are self-evident: Low salaries, poor grant support, and difficulty attracting students and postdocs. But last July British education minister Robert Jackson challenged British universities to show him evidence that there really is a brain drain.

Ironically, it was the Brits abroad who responded to the challenge. Matthew Freeman and Simon Hughes, two University of California postdocs, formed "British Scientists Abroad" and in 6 months had collected 1600 signatures from British scientists all over the world.

The petition urges Thatcher to improve U.K. support of science. Britain spends only 0.58% of its gross domestic product on science, says Freeman, compared to 0.96% in West Germany and 0.91% in France.

## Biotech Protection

House members last week introduced a bill that they say will help protect biotechnology patents and thereby stimulate bioengineering research. But the bill's provisions could be a double-edged sword for some biotech companies.

The measure, sponsored by Representative Rick Boucher (D–VA), would close a legal loophole that allows foreign companies to make biotechnology products using components patented in the United States without getting permission from the patent holders and to sell the products without paying royalties.

The proposed bill, the Biotechnology Patent Protection Act of 1990, would give the International Trade Commission the power to exclude products made by companies that have not obtained permission to use U.S.–patented products. Boucher thinks this will boost interest in domestic biotech companies on the part of investors who, he says, have been deterred by uncertainty about patent protection.

While many biotech companies, including Genentech, favor the bill, several key firms have withheld support. Genetics Institute of Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, is worried that the legislation could undermine its standing in a long running patent battle with Amgen Inc. of Thousand Oaks, California.

Both companies have been awarded U.S. patents related to the production of erythropoeitin (EPO), the hormone that stimulates red cell production. But Genetics Institute manufactures EPO in Japan in collaboration with a Japanese company, which uses the same host cell for which Amgen received a patent. As a result, if the bill were approved, Genetics Institute claims it could not import EPO from Japan.

The Industrial Biotechnology Association's patent committee favors the bill. Its board is expected to vote on the issue at a meeting on 19 February.

## Primate Use Down

How much is the animal rights movement costing science? Anecdotal evidence suggests that a combination of rising costs, stringent new regulations, and fear of animal activists is not only reducing the use of animals in research but is keeping a lot of newly minted investigators away from research involving animals.

So far there don't seem to be any systematic surveys of these trends. But indirect evidence—citation statistics from the National Institute of Medicine's Medline database—suggests that the use of primates, at least, in research has been sharply decreasing.

According to Medline, the number of articles published that are based on data from primate studies has fallen from 8496 in 1977 to 3408 in 1988. The biggest drop has occurred in substance abuse studies involving primates—from 5799 to 2186.

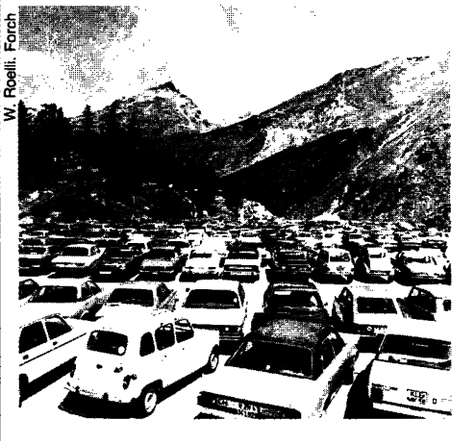
## OTA Speaks Out on Communications

More research and development is needed if the United States is to retain its lead in communications and information technologies, according to a new study by the Office of Technology Assessment.

The report, *Critical Connections: Communication for the Future*, says Congress should act soon to establish new regulatory structures and standards to keep up with the rapidly changing scene. Otherwise, it says regulation attempts will be hobbled by market chaos and the disorderly proliferation of new technologies.

International competition in communications services and equipment also poses an increasing threat to the U.S. communication industry. American exports of computers and telecommunications equipment fell by 6% for the 5 years ending in 1987.

The report says phone rates may need to be raised and new mechanisms need to be found for financing research on software, switching technology, and intelligent systems.




**Alps threatened with deforestation.** *Air pollution—largely from automobile traffic—has taken its toll on the trees throughout the Alps. The Swiss Forest Institute and other agencies estimate that more than 50% of all alpine trees are sick; 15% are dead or dying. Tourist traffic is exacting an increasingly heavy toll: 30 tons of nitrogen oxide, 25 tons of hydrocarbons, and 75 kilograms of lead are released into the air during an average ski weekend near St. Gotthard Pass, Switzerland, according to Greenpeace. The weakened state of the local flora and fauna has left them more susceptible to disease and may explain why over 50% of the native plants and animals considered endangered or threatened are alpine species, according to the Council of Europe.*