Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Update: RU 486

RU 486, the French abortifacient drug, remains off limits in the United States, but the clamor for making it available is getting louder—especially in California. Last month the California Medical Association adopted a resolution supporting "the legal availability of RU 486 for use in appropriate clinical investigation and, if indicated, appropriate clinical practice." It will submit a similar proposal at the American Medical Association annual meeting in June. State Attorney General John Van de Kamp, a Democratic candidate for governor, has also come out in favor of the drug, as has political activist Carol Ruth Silver, a former member of the San Francisco board of supervisors. She has joined a group of physicians led by Bernard Gore to try to start a testing program that would lead to licensing the drug for general use.

Similar projects are under way in other parts of the country, but the California group has one advantage: if the federal Food and Drug Administration doesn't approve the trial, researchers could still obtain approval from California for a local trial. So far, however, manufacturer Roussel-Uclaf has refused to make the drug available outside of France.

Math Students Needed

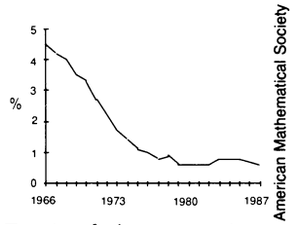
A new report from the National Research Council chronicles the growing mismatch between the inadequate supply of people being trained in the mathematical sciences and projected demand for them in the work force.

According to the Committee on the Mathematical Sciences in the Year 2000, the increase in the demand for mathematical scientists between 1986 and 2000 will be far greater (29%) than the growth in demand for all kinds of workers (19%).

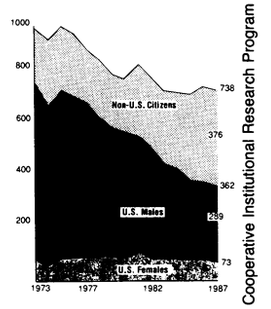
But the absolute numbers of U.S. students receiving undergraduate and graduate degrees in math—after rising sharply in the late 1960s—have receded to the levels of the mid-1960s. "Socioeconomic forces have resulted in unprecedented low interest in mathematics as a major among entering freshmen," says the report. Indeed, "most entering students are not mathematically prepared for college-level courses." Enrollments in remedial courses have tripled since 1965.

The faculty picture is also stagnant. Mathematical sciences faculty total about 25,000, or 5.5% of the collegiate faculty. Although there has been a great increase in part-time faculty, the number of full-timers has risen little since 1970. The "mild" shortages of the early '80s are likely to become "severe" with the oncoming wave of retirements.

The report, "A Challenge of Numbers," is the second from the MS 2000 committee, which is headed by University of Maryland president William E. Kirwan. "Everybody Counts," issued last year, analyzed trends and needs in math education. A final report containing recommendations on math in colleges and universities is scheduled for late this year.



Entering freshmen expecting to major in math.



Math doctorates.

AIDS Meeting: Visas

Bowing to international pressure, the U.S. government will offer a new 10-day visa for persons wanting to attend scientific meetings in the United States. Applicants will not have to say whether they are infected with HIV, a departure from former policy.

Organizations around the world—including the International AIDS Society which is co-sponsoring the Sixth International Conference on AIDS in San Francisco in June—have roundly criticized U.S. immigration policy for discriminating against persons with AIDS (*Science*, 6 April, p. 26). The new waivers are "a positive step" says Chai Feldblum of the American Civil Liberties Union. But she believes a better step would be legislation introduced by Representative J. Roy Rowland (D–GA) that would permit AIDS to be removed from the list of contagious diseases that can be used to deny visas to foreign visitors.

Faces of Eve. *These four images are composites of 4, 8, 16, and 32 faces, respectively. The more the faces were "averaged," the more attractive raters found them.*

Ordinary Is Beautiful

What makes a face attractive? Two psychologists at the University of Texas at Austin think they have found the answer: averageness.

According to Judith H. Langlois and Lori A. Roggmann, it has been assumed since Darwin's time that "standards of beauty are culturally specific and that attempts to determine universal or underlying dimensions of beauty are futile." But why, then, would there probably be near universal agreement that Jane Fonda is prettier than—say—Phyllis Diller?

The "feature measurement approach" hasn't worked very well. But "a more parsimonious solution," say the researchers, is suggested by evolutionary theory and cognitive psychology. Natural selection generally favors the mean over the extreme; thus individuals with characteristics close to the mean may be judged more fit by their conspecifics. Research in cognitive psychology enforces the parallel theory that "attractive" faces are attractive because they represent a prototype of a face.

To test their hypothesis, the researchers digitized faces of college students and averaged them. Raters were asked to compare the attractiveness of the individuals' faces to composites made from up to 32 faces. Sure enough, average won. Of 96 individual female faces, for example, only 4 were rated as more attractive than the composites.

The research is reported in the March issue of the new journal *Psychological Science*.