edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Gallo Inquiry: NAS Panel Wants In

The now 6-month long NIH inquiry into *l'affaire* Robert Gallo may begin to move apace if the ad hoc committee of outside overseers has its way. In a letter last week to NIH acting director William Raub, the committee asked for direct access to data on the AIDS viruses that are at the center of the inquiry (*Science*, 22 June, p. 1494).

The central issue of the inquiry is to determine whether Gallo misappropriated a strain of HIV given him by Luc Montagnier and his colleagues at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. The ten-member oversight committee, chaired by Frederic Richards of Yale, was nominated by the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine and is advisory to Raub. After watching from the sidelines as an internal NIH panel plowed through some 60 notebooks from the Gallo lab and conducted a dozen interviews with Gallo and key lab members, the Richards committee decided that if its role in the inquiry is to be credible, the committee must be more directly involved.

Committee member Howard Morgan signed the letter to Raub on behalf of Richards. "Our wanting to be more involved does not imply that there was any wrongdoing in the Gallo lab," Morgan told *Science*. "But we want to be sure what the facts are firsthand."

Gallo, who has been frustrated with the pace of the inquiry, is gratified by the Richards committee's move. "I wish they'd been directly involved all along," he says.

Getting Stoned the Healthy Way

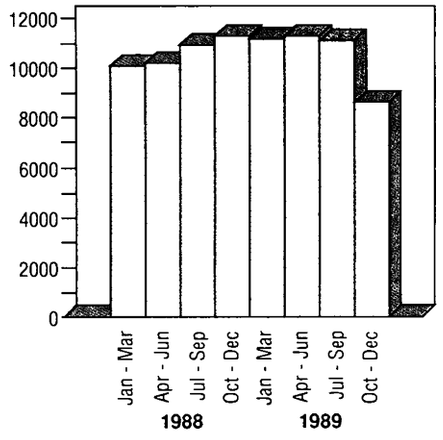
When drug czar William Bennett calls for "user accountability," he means getting tough with users. In the Netherlands, the same idea is turned around to mean "harm reduction," a get-soft approach in which the government essentially tolerates casual drug use while providing users with copious amounts of health information and advice.

The Dutch approach was described by health official Eddy Engelsman at a seminar held last month by the Smithsonian's Woodrow Wilson International Center at which American, English, and Dutch scholars and government officials discussed the relevance of European decriminalization policies to the United States.

"The effects of drug *use* are often confused with the effects of drug *policy*," said Engelsman. By treating drug use as a public health rather than a criminal problem, he said his country has been successful in avoiding this confusion. Punitive social policies drive users "into the fringes of society where we cannot reach them," said Engelsman—but when the government treats users responsibly, they act responsibly. "The typical addict is in no way an antisocial junkie," he asserted, adding that users counsel each other about health risks and disseminate pamphlets urging responsible behavior.

The Dutch approach wouldn't work here, said Yale University psychiatrist and drug historian David Musto. He claimed that the Dutch tolerate drugs only because their problem is tiny compared with that in the United States. "If they had our problem, they'd be looking at prohibition, too."

For the moment, at least, one U.S. statistic offers some support for Bennett's strategy. According to the latest government data, emergency room admissions for cocaine abuse showed a sharp decline at the end of last year.



Coke trails. *The Drug Abuse Warning Network of the National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that, in the last quarter of 1989, the number of cocaine-related emergency room admissions dropped by 24% from a peak of 11,302 cases reported in the second quarter of 1989. While the agency says it can identify no statistical artifacts which could have led to this decrease, it urges caution in interpreting the result until at least another quarter's worth of data can be analyzed.*

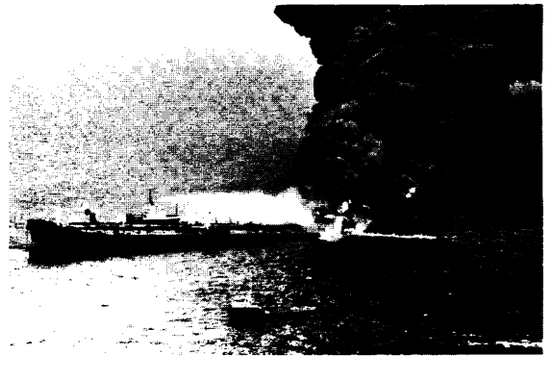
Gulf Slick a Free Lunch for Bacteria

Up to now, most researchers interested in how oil-eating microbes might help clean up oil spills—such as last year's *Exxon Valdez* spill in Alaska—have used nitrogen and phosphate fertilizers to encourage the growth of naturally occurring bacteria. But last month, after the supertanker *Mega Borg* caught fire and spilled nearly 4 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, Texas officials decided to try using bacteria specially grown for their ravenous petro appetites.

Many bacteria are capable of producing fatty acids from oil, a process which leaves the remaining oil products more water-soluble. The largely insoluble acids then serve as food for plankton and other organisms. The microbial strains grown by University of Texas oceanographer Carl Oppenheimer differ from their natural cousins only in their ability to eat a wide variety of crude oils and in their aversion to water, which means that they won't live much longer than it takes them to snack on a slick.

Preliminary results from the Gulf tests—the first open-sea trials of Oppenheimer's bacteria—did indicate that microbes were converting the crude oil as predicted. But critics charge that the experimental design made it difficult to collect reliable data and to ensure that the experimental microbes, and not indigenous bacteria, actually dispersed the oil. The technique is also opposed by environmentalists who claim that dissolving oil shifts the environmental damage deeper into the water column and that non-indigenous bacteria could disturb the ocean ecology.

Oppenheimer dismisses such objections. He says that 24 hours of observation failed to turn up toxic effects, since "there was no evidence of organisms floating to the surface." He also thinks fears of foreign bacteria are groundless. Citing his calculations that ocean currents carry bacteria from Japan to Alaska in 4 months, he says there is probably no such thing as "indigenous" bacteria.



UPI/Bettmann

Bacterial snack. *The 9 June fire on* Mega Borg *provided a new opportunity for a high-tech clean-up.*