

Briefings

edited by FAYE FLAM

Berg to Head NIH Genome Committee

Paul Berg, the Nobel Prize-winning biochemist and molecular biologist from Stanford, is the new chairman of the influential committee that advises James Watson and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on its genome project, budgeted at \$87 million for 1991. He replaces Norton Zinder of Rockefeller University, who has chaired the Program Advisory Committee on the Human Genome since its inception in 1989. Early on, Zinder described his job as "interpreting Jim Watson to the rest of the world."

Other new additions to the 12-member committee are molecular biologist Robert Tjian of the University of California, Berkeley, who replaces David Botstein of Stanford, and Diane C. Smith, an engineer and computer scientist from the Xerox Corp., who replaces Jamie Carbonell of Carnegie-Mellon University.

The Graying of Physics

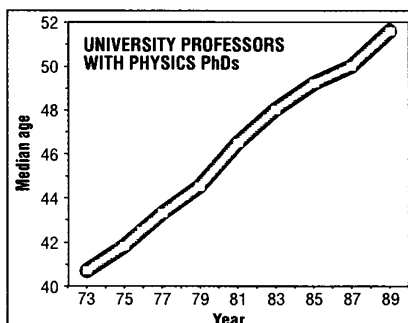
Some kinds of physicists are said to do their best work in their 20s. If so, the average physics department is well past its prime. Between 1973 and 1989 the median age for physics faculty members advanced from 40.7 to 51.6, according to statistics collected by the National Research Council and published in the *Bulletin of the American Physical Society*. By 1987, the statistics show, the proportion of physics professors under age 40 had fallen to 12%.

Phillip Schewe, a physicist who is now the public affairs director for the

American Institute of Physics, attributes the trend to a physics hiring boom in the late 1960s and early '70s. "In my experience," he says, "there was a huge crest of people getting tenured positions at that time. That group—around 30 years old in the '70s—moved through like a tidal wave."

When a trough followed that crest, he says, there was little room for any fresh faces. The entrenched, tenured professors just kept getting older.

Within a few years, Schewe predicts, physics will see a boom of retirement parties, and young physicists will have their day again.



Source: National Research Council

The new committee will meet for the first time on 25 June.

Meanwhile, NIH has just created its seventh genome center, at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Led by principal investigator Beverly Emanuel and scientific director Robert Nussbaum, the center—funded at \$10 million over the next 5 years—will concentrate on mapping chromosome 22, fittingly known as the Philadelphia Chromosome. The ultimate goal of

the group, which will include researchers from the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center, the Fox Chase Medical Center, and the DuPont Merck Pharmaceutical Company as well as from the Children's Hospital, is to locate and identify all of the 1000 to 2000 genes thought to reside on the chromosome. Abnormalities of this chromosome are associated with childhood leukemia, other cancers, and birth defects.

Jekyll and Hyde GAO?

When the General Accounting Office (GAO) last month issued a report critical of the Superconducting Super Collider program to build superconducting magnets (*Science*, 17 May, p. 909), Energy Secretary James Watkins lost no time in penning an angry letter to the congressional oversight committee that publicized the findings. Berating GAO for failing to seek final comments on its conclusions (something GAO never does), he wrote: "This report is an example of how the GAO does not always serve the best interests of Congress or the tax-paying public." The agency's reports should provide a "complete and unbiased picture of the issues," he added. "This report misses that fundamental purpose by a wide mark."

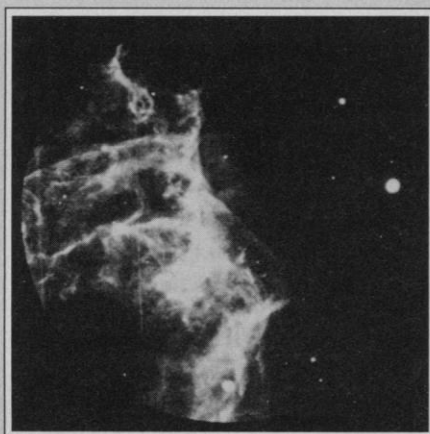
Just a week earlier, however, Watkins had apparently found that same team of investigators and its procedures eminently fair. When a 14-month study of facilities in the Naval Reactors Program gave the program a clean bill of health, Watkins responded: "Given the breadth of the GAO audit, their 'no significant deficiencies' conclusion represents the strongest possible endorsement of the technical excellence of the program."

Will the real energy secretary please stand up?

Astro Redux

Astro has a new lease on life. NASA had grounded the ultra-violet and x-ray observatory after the Astro-1 mission last December, when the instrument package flew aboard the space shuttle for 9 days. Last week, Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) and Lennard Fisk, NASA's associate administrator for science, announced that Astro would fly again sometime in 1993.

With its three spectrographs and one camera, Astro-1 observed, at ultra-violet and x-ray wavelengths, parts of the spectrum that are undetectable from Earth and have rarely been studied from space. Even though computer bugs prevented half the planned observations, Astro-1 recorded hot stars, supernova remnants, active galaxies, and quasars with what



Astro vision. Supernova remnant photographed by Astro-1.

NASA Goddard Space Flight Center

Fisk called "unprecedented resolution and sensitivity."

Astro-1 was to have been the first of six flights, but NASA bumped Astro from later shuttle missions, citing money troubles and a crowded shuttle schedule. But Mikulski, whose Senate appropriations subcommittee oversees NASA, argued that since \$150 million had already been invested in Astro and the observatory had proved it worked, it "shouldn't be jettisoned." When NASA and the government make a

commitment to science, said Mikulski, "we should make sure we're a reliable and sustainable partner."

NASA agreed, budgeting another \$30 million over the next 4 years. Astro-2 will fly with most of the original instruments and will begin by looking at some astronomical objects Astro-1 had missed.