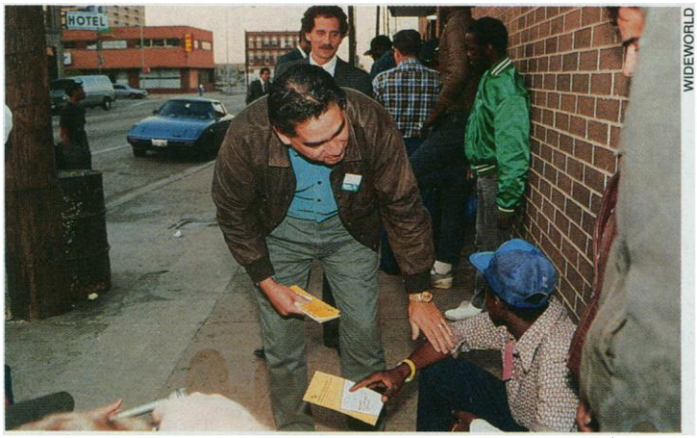
Academy to Study Flaws in Decennial Census



WIDEWORLD

Are U.S. citizens overburdened by too many questions in the census?

■ The decennial census, criticized in 1990 for taking longer and missing more people than any census in U.S. history, will soon be the subject of a 3-year study by the National Academy of Sciences, if President Bush signs legislation now on his desk.

Few deny that the census is in need of reform. The response to the written questionnaire mailed to all households in 1990 was an all-time low of 64% (*Science*, 18 May 1990, p. 807). Enumerators who subsequently fanned out across the nation to locate non-respondents missed 2.1% of the population, or 5.3 million people. Then, last summer, Census Bureau director Barbara Bryant recommended a statistical adjustment to compensate for the undercount, only to be overruled by Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher.

With these problems in mind, Representative Tom Sawyer (D–OH), chairman of the House Census and Population subcommittee, wrote the bill authorizing the study, apparently hoping that the academy's independent scholars will echo his own vision of reform. According to an aide, Sawyer thinks the decennial census has been "overburdened" by an accumulation of questions on personal and housing matters now on the census form. Such data, the aide says, might be better collected through regular, sampled surveys, allowing the census questionnaire to be slimmed down in order to boost response rates.

Malaria Clinical Trials

■ Clinical trials of three new drugs for malaria treatment will soon get under way, the result of a new emphasis by the World Health Organization (WHO) on fostering drug development in industry.

With malaria vaccine development stalled and mosquitoes in tropical regions fast developing resistance to existing drugs, new treatments are badly needed. The latest candidates are injectable derivatives of artemisinin, the active constituent of a Chinese herb traditionally used to combat fever. Clinical trials will take place over the next 4 to 5 years in the Netherlands and several African and Asian nations.

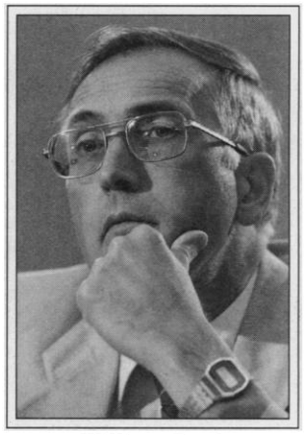
These drugs are the first that WHO has supported from the earliest stages of development through clinical trials—a new policy resulting from industry's "lack of interest" in developing drugs on its own, says Tore Godal, director of WHO's tropical disease program. Previously, WHO concentrated on support for academic research and clinical trial management.

NIH Deputy Director Moves Over to OSTP

■ In the latest personnel shakeup at the NIH, deputy director William Raub soon will be leaving the agency to take a position at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP).

For the last 6 months, Raub has virtually been a forgotten man at NIH. Although he served as acting director for nearly 2 years, ably steering the agency through the rough political waters of scientific misconduct and laying the groundwork for NIH's new financial management plan and the women's health initiative, he faded into the woodwork when Bernadine Healy came on board as permanent director last April. Healy now insists that if he so chooses, Raub will be welcome to return to a senior NIH management position after his stint at the White House. But Healy was outspoken in her criticism of Raub's handling of the Baltimore and Gallo misconduct investigations, and he has not been part of her inner circle for the past several months of long-term planning for NIH's future.

At OSTP, Raub will be a special assistant for health affairs. He will report to D.A. Henderson, deputy director for life sciences. Ironically, the last person to hold Henderson's job was Raub's old boss, James Wyngaarden, NIH director from 1982 to 1989.



William Raub

EPRI Epidemiology

■ A fight is brewing within the electric power community over the fate of a proposed $5 to $8 million epidemiological study of the effects of radiation on U.S. nuclear plant workers. Several industry experts, claiming the project would merely lead to confusion by producing no clear results, are trying to prevent the Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI) from funding what would be the largest ever occupational study of this kind, covering perhaps as many as 500,000 workers.

Ralph Lapp, a well-known radiation physicist, says that EPRI is facing unprecedented technical dissent from within. He claims there is already plenty of evidence that nuclear utilities are among the safest places to work, at least in terms of cancer risk, and that the proposed EPRI study would raise new concerns without yielding any answers. "We don't need to engage in an exercise that is not going to resolve the radiation issue," Lapp says. Earlier this year, two like-minded health physicists serving on a technical advisory committee to EPRI—Michael Williams of the Union Electric Company and private consultant Joyce Davis—also objected to the study in a lengthy technical dissent.

But Leeka Kheifets, chief staffer for the project at EPRI, notes that a majority of EPRI's advisory committee endorsed the plan, as did an independent panel at the National Academy of Sciences last June. Still, the project cannot go forward without a vote of approval from EPRI members scheduled for next January. In addition, researchers must persuade each utility to share employees' radiation and health data.

Why all the fuss? According to Kheifets, "Some people are apprehensive about epidemiological research"—which suggests that the only thing some people fear more than ambiguous results are non-ambiguous ones.

EDITED BY DAVID P. HAMILTON