edited by RICHARD STONE

Chernobyl Cancers to Come Under Scrutiny

Has radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl explosion caused thyroid cancer in children of two former Soviet republics, Ukraine and Belarus? Some Western radiation experts and Belarussian health officials say so, but other Western experts have questioned the data. Now there's a chance to settle the debate: The National Cancer Institute (NCI), the Department of Energy, and the Health ministries of Belarus and Ukraine are planning a joint 20-year study of 85,000 children that could begin as early as this spring.

Researchers have good reason to look for thyroid cancers near Chernobyl, which lies 80 miles north of Kiev, Ukraine. When a nuclear reactor exploded there in April 1986, it spewed millions of curies of radioactive iodine 131, an element stored in the thyroid. Because developing thyroids are adept at storing iodine, health officials braced for a rash of thyroid cancer cases in children exposed to fallout. They had expected to begin to see these cases 5 to 10 years after the accident, the time it took such cancers to develop in atomic-bomb victims.

But just 4 years after the accident, Belarus officials saw a jump in incidence in some parts of Belarus. For example, in the Gomel region north of Chernobyl, the number of cases soared from two in 1989 to 14 in 1990 to 38 in 1991. The findings sparked a debate in *Nature* in 1992 in which some scientists argued the rise may have stemmed from improved vigilance rather than radiation.

A U.S. team of scientists and physicians led by Bruce Wachholz, chief of NCI's radiation effects branch, will work with Belarussian and Ukrainian scientists to determine if radiation truly is the culprit. The researchers plan to reconstruct the iodine doses received by 15,000 Belarussian and up to 70,000 Ukrainian children, and to study thyroid function and disease in these children over the next 20 years. The scientists hope to get their protocols approved and running by April.

NOVOSTI / Y. KOKTYSH

Chernobyl vigil. NCI plans study of thyroid cancers in Belarussians exposed to fallout in 1986.

Varmus Pushes an NIH University

When new National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Harold Varmus said he wanted to make the NIH campus feel more like a university (*Science*, 26 November 1993, p. 1364), he wasn't merely appeasing disenfranchised researchers: He actually wants NIH to hand out graduate degrees. That's the goal of an initiative Varmus is pushing to weave education into the fabric of NIH life.

The idea of an NIH grad school has been around for more than 20 years. NIH now hosts about 100 grad students from local universities, who earn degrees from their own schools. For starters, Varmus says he wants to expand this program nationwide, such that medical students could get a Ph.D. from their home university by doing 3 or 4 years of NIH research. Ultimately, he says, NIH could offer its own degrees.

Varmus, who did some of his own Ph.D. research at NIH in the late 1960s, says interacting with young scientists would help invigorate NIH researchers. Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences, calls the idea "long overdue."

But don't expect "NIH University" to become a diploma mill anytime soon. Varmus would have to persuade Congress to authorize NIH to award degrees, and the program may require state approval. And Varmus is swimming against a political tide: The White House "Reinventing Government" report suggests closing the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, the Defense Department's medical school. Moreover, former NIH director James Wyngaarden says a similar proposal received little support—both on campus and in Congress—a few years ago.

For now, Varmus says, the grad school idea is with his external advisory panel, which is expected to report on it next month.

Activist Bombings Menace British Scientists

Rattled by a series of letter bombs from animal activists, British researchers are calling on their government to take a tougher stand against such terrorist acts. But their pleas for extra powers to fight extremist groups appear to be falling on deaf ears: A spokesman says the British government has no plans to come down harder on activists.

Last fall, an activist group called "The Justice Department" took credit for mailing 34 bombs that injured seven. "People are terrified," says Oxford biologist Colin Blakemore, whose daughter handled—but did not detonate—a bomb. "The government should act," he says.

For now, however, Britain must rely on standard law. Hoping for broader coverage, a London-based group that represents animal experimenters, the Research Defence Society (RDS), demanded extra measures to protect researchers in a 5 January letter to British Home Secretary Michael Howard, whose office oversees the police.

A Home Office spokesman says Scotland Yard's anti-terrorist squad is putting in extra hours to track down the activists, but he did not foresee any changes in the law. Nevertheless, the RDS intends to keep up the pressure by sending sympathetic members of Parliament and bomb victims to visit the Home Secretary in the coming weeks.

NIMH Braces for a Sea Change

A major upheaval in leadership appears to be brewing at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). *Science* has learned that by February, the administration plans to nominate Alan Leshner, a research psychologist who now serves as deputy director of NIMH, to be director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). In addition, embattled NIMH director Frederick Goodwin may soon depart for calmer waters.

The NIDA position is currently vacant; attorney Richard Millstein is serving as acting director. Although the job would be new for Leshner, the territory would not. An expert on behavioral biology, Leshner has been a top manager at NIMH for 6 years, during which he forged good relations with health activists and their allies on Capitol Hill. Leshner declined to comment on reports that he will move to NIDA.

Meanwhile, longstanding rumors that Goodwin is planning to leave became more credible last week, NIMH insiders say. Goodwin, a leader in depression research, has enjoyed strong support on the Hill, but became a lightning rod for controversy in 1992 after comparing street violence to primate behavior in the jungle. According to sources close to NIMH leadership who wished to remain anonymous, Goodwin may soon transfer "on loan" to a local university's psychiatry department. Goodwin was out of town and couldn't be reached for comment, but an NIMH spokesperson says Goodwin "has no plans to leave the institute at this time."

NIMH already needs an intramural research chief and a chief of preventive and behavioral medicine. The intramural post has been vacant for more than a year, and the other job frees up next week when incumbent Susan Blumenthal assumes her new post as deputy assistant secretary for women's health at the Department of Health and Human Services.