

the United States," he says. A similar endorsement comes from developmental neurobiologist Shashi Wadhwa of the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. A frequent NICNET user, Wadhwa learned from searching abstracts available through NICNET about a new technique that has benefited her work on ganglion cells in the eye.

Not everybody is happy about NICNET's new capabilities, however. Officials in the Department of Electronics, which operates a second government network, the Education and Research network, or ERNET, would like to have seen some of the new investment in NICNET come their way. ERNET was created in 1986 as a pilot project to demonstrate how to connect the nation's universi-

ties and research institutes, and it quickly won scientists' backing. Indeed, a heavy demand for networking services rapidly pushed it beyond its backbone of the five Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)—India's elite engineering schools—and the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, until it now operates more than 250 nodes across India. One result: "Computer networking has broken down hierarchical barriers in scientific research," says Srinivasa Ramakrishnan, ERNET's director. "Younger scientists in India have free access to the world without bothering to ask permission from their superiors."

ERNET is, however, getting overloaded. It transmits information at only 9.6 kbps, and it depends on leased telephone lines that

break down frequently. An improvement to 64 kbps, as well as 64-kbps satellite links for its backbone, is planned, but a proposal to upgrade to 2.2 megabits per second was rejected because of its \$33 million cost.

The latest expansion of NICNET is likely to make it the information highway of choice for Indian researchers. That's fine with Seshagiri who, between trips to Mars, is busy working out ways to improve the ease of locating and accessing data on the network. His goal is to give Indian scientists access to anything, anywhere, whenever they wish.

—Bhupesh Mangla

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## GERMANY

### Public Health Agency Shakeup Opposed

**BERLIN**—Researchers at Germany's largest public-health agency are up in arms over a proposal to reduce the independence of the agency and bring it under tighter control of the government's secretary of health. The scientists say the restructuring would hamper their ability to notify the public of impending health threats and delay the adoption of other measures to ensure the safety of drugs and other health-related products.

The proposal before the Bundestag, Germany's parliament, would dissolve the agency, the Bundesgesundheitsamt (BGA), into four institutions reporting to the health ministry. BGA, which aspires to a role similar to those of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, began 118 years ago as the Robert Koch Institute and was expanded and made into an independent federal agency in 1952. Since then, it has grown into the largest public-health institution in the country, with 3000 scientists and technical employees.

The new law would dismantle BGA by taking away its central coordinating division, now headed by an interim president. The remaining divisions, which now study problems as diverse as environmental toxins, drug safety and epidemiology, would be grouped into four "independent" institutes, each with its own president. Three would be directly responsible to Secretary of Health Horst Seehofer, and the fourth would report to the environmental minister.

Last week, at a hearing before the Bundestag's health committee, some 50 experts testified against Seehofer's plan. Scien-

tists are unhappy that the presidents of such nominally independent institutions would in reality be overseen by a lawyer or other nonscientist within the health ministry and that the authority of the BGA president would be eroded. The Working Group of Scientific-Medical Societies (AWMF), representing 88 of 100 organizations in the field and some 90,000 professionals, has declared that "only a politically and economically independent BGA led by scientists can ensure the quality of drugs and medical products." Walter Messer, speaking for Germany's premier science organization, the Max Planck Society, said it was "unlikely that ministerial guidance would increase efficiency." And Georg Henneberg, a former BGA president, said he feared that legal experts at the ministry might try to direct the work of scientists. The strongest support came from representatives of the pharmaceutical industry, which hopes the changes will speed up the drug-approval process.

Seehofer says closer political oversight is needed in the wake of the agency's failure last fall to keep him adequately informed about a scandal involving the im-

proper screening by some German companies for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) among blood donors. In short order, Dieter Groszklaus, then president of the BGA, took early retirement and Gottfried Kreutz, head at the relevant division at BGA's medical institute, was suspended. The head of the ministry's programs on communicable diseases was also forced out. Kreutz has since been quietly reinstated.

Within days, however, it became known

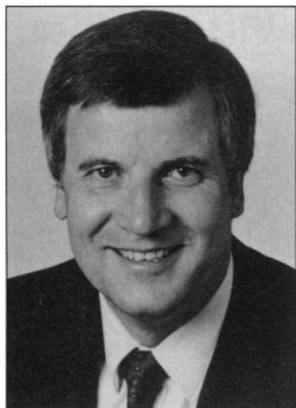
that the vast majority of the incidents, involving 373 hemophiliacs who had been given blood-clotting agents contaminated with HIV, took place before a blood test became available in 1985. Moreover, all cases had been registered properly and were included in statistics published monthly by the BGA. An investigation by parliament has so far failed to substantiate allegations of a coverup at BGA.

BGA scientists who oppose the changes argue that the current system is already vulnerable to political influence, and the proposed reorganization would make matters worse. They point to the conduct of the government last summer in response to a report of mad-cow disease (BSE) in Great Britain, when BGA recommended the government stop importing British beef to rule out the risk of a transmission to humans in Germany, where the disease is rare. Such a ban would require consensus within the European Community, and the ministry, choosing not to seek such a step, removed the recommendation before making the report available to the Bundestag. (Seehofer is, however, now actively pushing for such a ban among his European counterparts.) In another incident, this one involving the spread of salmonella, a BGA recommendation to require that eggs be cooled after 10 days as a way to slow the replication of the bacteria was watered down to 18 days after lobbying by agribusinesses worried about the cost of the preventive action.

The Bundestag must still vote on the proposed change, which Seehofer regards as one piece of a larger overhaul of the country's health-care system. But opponents appear to have time on their side: The ruling coalition government could well be toppled in elections this fall, and the opposition socialist party does not favor such a change.

—Michael Simm

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**In control.** Health Minister Horst Seehofer wants a restructured agency.

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