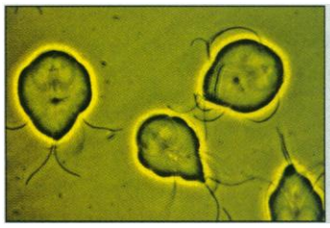
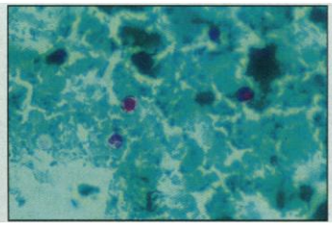
edited by RICHARD STONE




**Poisoning the well.** EPA fears its new rule to cut exposure to chlorine in drinking water may increase illness from giardia *(left)* and cryptosporidium.

## EPA Queasy Over Chlorine Rule

Policymakers at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have often taken heat for proposing regulations not firmly rooted in science. So when EPA faced the controversial task of drawing up exposure limits on byproducts of chlorine and other chemicals widely used to disinfect drinking water, the agency assembled a team of outside experts in November 1992 to help devise scientifically robust regs. In the process, EPA emerged in a new role—arguing that the new exposure limits are based on weak data and may even undermine public health.

Under the Safe Drinking Water Act, EPA is required to set exposure limits on waterborne substances that pose health risks. Such chemicals include chlorine dioxide and disinfection byproducts (DBPs) such as chloroform, a carcinogen. In 1992, a meta-analysis of epidemiological studies found that such chemicals raised the risk of bladder cancer by 21% and rectal cancer by 38% in the study populations. If the data were interpreted conservatively, more than 10,000 cancer cases a year could be attributed to chlorine and DBPs.

But EPA was faced with a dilemma: These chemicals purge water of known health hazards such as the protozoa giardia and cryptosporidium. (The latter microbe sickened 370,000 people in Milwaukee last September.) Realizing that it would have to balance the real threat of pathogens against the statistical risk of cancer, EPA put together a panel of experts from utilities, environmental groups, and academia. Some panelists—including EPA officials—questioned the epidemiological data, arguing that DBP exposures may be so low that they cause no cancer. But in the end the panel decided to give credence to the risk estimates.

In a rule to be published in the *Federal Register*, EPA proposes lowering exposure to chlorine and DBPs. But EPA raises concerns about the hazard of giardia infection in a companion drinking-water rule, in which it warns that the DBP rule "may potentially undermine pathogen control" and "result in a substantial increase in waterborne illness for systems using a poor-quality source water." The rule is expected to provoke plenty of comment in hearings this September.

## French Tap New Research Chief

Ever since France's conservative government took over from its socialist predecessor in March 1993, French scientists have been taking bets on whether it would retire immunologist François Kourilsky as director-general of the country's largest public research agency, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). Kourilsky's second 3-year term runs out 19 July, and odds were against the socialist appointee getting a third contract. Now it appears the oddsmakers were right. On 22 June, government ministers were expected to tap a new director-general: Physicist Guy Aubert, director of the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Lyons.

French researchers contacted by *Science* gave Kourilsky high marks for his tenure. According to one who requested anonymity pending announcement of the change, Kourilsky was a good communicator who "improved the image of CNRS, both nationally and internationally."

But Kourilsky is leaving considerable challenges for Aubert, who played a central role in coordinating feedback from thousands of French scientists during the recent nationwide forum on French research (see p. 1840). One of Aubert's first tasks will be to address what one researcher calls a "chronic disease" at CNRS: A top-heavy structure in which salaries at the 11,000-researcher agency eat up more than 70% of its $2.2-billion budget.

## Indirect Cost Pause May Be Stopped Cold

Universities appear to be winning Congress over to their side in opposing a White House move to prevent them from receiving more money next year in overhead costs on federal research grants. So far, all seven of the House appropriations panels that were asked by the Clinton Administration to consider a 1-year freeze in indirect cost reimbursements have omitted it from their appropriations bills, and the so-called "pause" is expected to face similar rough sledding in the Senate.

The Administration had hoped to use the pause—which would apply to any institution receiving more than $10 million in grants—to trim federal spending by $150 million in 1995. The White House has also begun a year-long, interagency review of the issue. In the meantime, the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the measure would save no money in 1995 and only about $130 million in 1996.

Now the tide in the House is turning against the pause. Appropriations bills for three agencies (Energy, Agriculture, and Transportation) have cleared the House floor pause-less. And a spokesman for one of the provision's main opponents, Howard Gobstein of the Association of American Universities, says he's "guardedly optimistic" that the House will approve other bills without the pause. The Senate has yet to take action, but key appropriations leaders—including Senators Barbara Mikulski (D–MD) and Bennett Johnston (D–LA)—have spoken against the pause.

## House to Call for Second NIH Review

Last year, Congress asked the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to examine its $1.3-billion program of intramural research, looking for ways to improve peer review and stimulate innovative science. Now a House appropriations subcommittee wants to tackle a bigger and more politically sensitive topic that impinges on biomedical researchers nationwide: NIH's $8.7-billion program of extramural grants and contracts.

Aided by agency staffers and NIH director Harold Varmus, an outside panel earlier this year made fast work of the intramural review. The panel conducted a whirlwind inquiry and delivered a report to the House appropriations subcommittee that oversees the NIH budget in April, after just 4 months of analysis. The strongly worded document impressed Capitol Hill (*Science*, 13 May, p. 896).

In fact, members of the appropriations subcommittee liked the critique so much that they're demanding a replay. According to a directive expected to pass the appropriations committee earlier this week, NIH must launch a "ground-up review" of extramural studies, to be conducted by "an impartial group of scientists and science managers" outside of NIH. The House proposal notes that, "despite the dramatic growth of NIH's budget for extramural programs and the evolution of a larger and more diverse non-government biomedical research enterprise," funding mechanisms have remained unchanged for 20 years. The committee wants to know whether these support systems—ranging from investigator-initiated grants to massive research-center contracts—still make sense. And it wants to hear back from the outside panel by 15 February 1995.

As *Science* went to press, NIH officials had not yet reviewed the proposal and had no comment other than to say the upcoming request is "a surprise."