

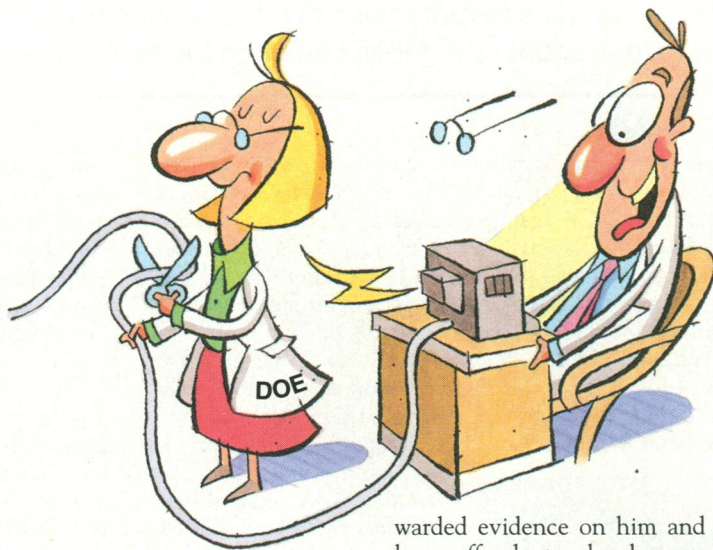
## Aubert Plans Overhaul of CNRS

French physicist Guy Aubert, the new head of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)—France's largest public research agency—is planning a major reorganization that for the first time may have agency scientists compete for grants.

Aubert proposed a plan to streamline the 11,000-scientist agency at a 17 September meeting with the heads of CNRS's 40 scientific sections. CNRS officials confirm reports from the meeting that Aubert wants to merge the agency's seven scientific departments into three and streamline collaboration between CNRS and university labs.

The plan's most dramatic aspect may be a scheme to overhaul the way CNRS funds its 1350 laboratories. Instead of giving each lab a fixed annual budget as it does now, Aubert reportedly wants to move toward an American-style system in which many CNRS scientists would have to submit project proposals for peer review. This plan is sure to generate controversy among those who feel the current system leaves scientists freer to do research.

Aubert declined to publicly comment because, says a spokesperson, "nothing has yet been decided." But that hasn't stopped the CNRS chief from shifting into high gear. Aubert has already appointed Laue-Langevin Institute physicist Jean Charvolin to chair a panel that will devise a restructuring blueprint to be unveiled in November.



## Pornography Ring Spurs DOE Probe

Add one more item to the list of problems the weapons labs are confronting in the post-Cold War world: pornography. Last July, a reporter at the *Los Angeles Times* stumbled onto a huge cache of about 90,000 "sexually explicit" photographs stashed in a computer at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The discovery has triggered an expensive crackdown by Livermore and its parent agency, the Department of Energy (DOE).

The collection, which consumed some 2000 megabytes of memory, had been squirreled away by a lab computer specialist and a handful of colleagues at other institutions who visited the file by way of the Internet. Last month, Livermore accepted the resignation of one staffer involved in the scandal and forwarded evidence on him and a lesser offender to a local prosecutor, who filed felony charges against both for misuse of government property. In recent days, four additional minor miscreants were identified at Livermore and at Sandia National Laboratory.

End of a tawdry tale? Not nearly. Livermore officials, with the blessing of DOE, have ordered a detailed, random survey of hard disks on at least 3000 computers. While this plan covers only about 10% of Livermore's machines, a lab official estimates that the cost of labor diverted to computer audits will run about \$1 million. Moreover, lab officials are now considering a 100% audit that could cost \$10 million, says a Livermore spokesperson. But an audit could be ineffective, a security expert at another weapons lab notes: Each computer user will get a day's notice beforehand, plenty of time to offload contraband.

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## House Election May Affect NIH Oversight

Iowa politics rarely captures the attention of biomedical scientists. Nor should it—except perhaps this November. After 35 years in the House, Representative Neal Smith (D-IA), chair of the subcommittee that funds the National Institutes of Health (NIH), is now engaged in an election-year dogfight to keep his job. If Smith fails to win, analysts say, his chairmanship would pass for the second year in a row to a new overseer of NIH funding. Smith took over earlier this year after the death of long-time chair William Natcher, revered as a champion of biomedical research.

In his 6-month tenure as chair of the appropriations subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education, Smith has called for efforts to educate the public about the benefits of biomedical research and opposed an Administration proposal to cut funds for indirect costs of NIH grants. But Smith's role could be cut short this fall, for his campaign manager says the representative is in a "tough" race against a well-funded Republican. To make matters worse, Smith's core support has eroded after areas that normally vote Democratic were cut from his district in 1990.

If Smith were to fall, Representative David Obey (D-WI), chair of the full appropriations committee, might take over the HHS subcommittee himself. Obey "has been very, very supportive of NIH funding" and shares the agency's proclivity for untargeted research, says Tony Mazzaschi of the American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics. For example, Obey was an outspoken opponent of efforts to earmark NIH funds for breast cancer research.

Still, the postelection political landscape remains largely unpredictable, and committee assignments are among the most volatile commodities.

## Spain and EU to Break Ground on Biology Lab

Spain, in a bid to reverse the brain drain, is joining up with the European Union to break ground next month on a 1-billion-peseta (\$8.4-million) biology research institute in Seville.

The Laboratorio Andaluz de Biología (LAB) will occupy a corner of the campus of the New University of Seville, located in southern Spain's state of Andalusia. Half of LAB's funding will come from central government and Andalusian coffers; matching funds are expected from the European Union under its Community Support Framework program, which rates Andalusia a "less favored region" based on per capita income.

As part of the effort to lure expatriates back to Spain, three prominent Spaniards now abroad—including cancer researcher Manuel Perucho of the California Institute of Biological Research in La Jolla—have agreed to head research teams in the new institute. "We want to approach a number of more senior scientists and give them a tenured position" in Spain, says José Mato, president of the Spanish Research Council. Mato says he hopes LAB will win over at least six topflight scientists.

LAB's directors plan to begin placing ads for staff next year; the 27-lab facility is expected to open in the fall of 1996.