

RUSSIA

Tampering Allegations Stall Science Law

MOSCOW—Russia's long-awaited law on science and technological policy seems to have fallen at the last hurdle, just before it was to have been written into the statute books. The problem: Some members of the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, may have altered the text of the law to change its impact after it was passed by the Duma itself. The alleged tampering came to light late last month when President Boris Yeltsin and the Council of the Federation (parliament's upper house) received copies of the law with different texts. Yeltsin has now sent the text to the procurator general for an official investigation. According to Nikolay Vorontsov, chair of the Duma's subcommittee on science, if deputies did make substantive changes to the language, the president could veto the legislation, and its passage through the Duma would have to begin again.

The legislation is an amalgamation of three rival bills put forward a year ago by the Ministry of Science and Technological Policy, the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), and the reformist Yavlinsky faction in the Duma. The proposed laws have been the focus of an intense debate, because the outcome could finally determine who controls Russian science. During the communist era, the Soviet Academy of Sciences was the supreme authority, and it ran hundreds of institutes where most of the Soviet Union's basic research was carried out. The RAS's status was cast in doubt by Yeltsin, however, when he created the Ministry of Science in 1991 to oversee it and other "branch" academies that sponsor research, and the RAS has railed against the ministry's control ever since.

During the first half of last year, the science subcommittee carefully crafted a single law from the three very different drafts (*Science*, 30 June 1995, p. 1844). The Duma itself debated the law twice, and in late autumn it approved a final version for consideration by the president and the Federation Council.

Deputy Speaker of the Duma Mikhail Mityukov says that after a copy of the law had been sent to the Federation Council, a group of senior RAS officials approached Duma Speaker Ivan Rybkin and asked him to make a slight change to article 6. This article defines the RAS's legal position as a state body, and hence everything it possesses—including land, buildings, vehicles, and equipment—is federal property that the RAS simply manages. As a result, phrases were added to the article that not only gave the RAS the right of "operative management and economic authority" over the property but even suggested that the RAS had the right to own it.

At a news conference on 26 December, Deputy Speaker Mityukov said that in addition to the changes to article 6, several other wording changes have also drawn criticism. Science Minister Boris Saltykov, for example, has protested changes to language governing the ownership of research commissioned by the state and carried out by defense industry contractors. Although Mityukov insists that the changes were "stylistic," Saltykov insists the new phrasing gives control of the research to the defense ministry rather than the science ministry.

The changes were approved on 12 December by Viktor Shevelukha, then acting chair of the Duma Committee on Culture, Education, and Science, apparently without informing the committee, and this version was sent to the president. Several days later, Vladimir Shumeyko, chair of the Federation Council, protested that because of these

changes the text he was given was not identical to the one in the president's office. It was this that prompted the president to order the procurator general's investigation.

The aim of the investigation is to determine whether the document was tampered with illegally, or if it was just a question of correcting inaccurate wording. Although the investigation has only just begun, accusations are already flying among Duma deputies. Mikhail Glubokovsky, who was deputy chair of the Committee on Culture, Education, and Science prior to December's general election, told *Science* he strongly doubts that in the new Duma committee he could work together with people such as Shevelukha, who belongs to a pro-communist faction. While researchers had hoped the law would soon resolve the issue of their official status and give new impetus to government funding, they now look set to remain even longer in legal limbo.

—Andrey Allakhverdiv

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MEDICAL RESEARCH

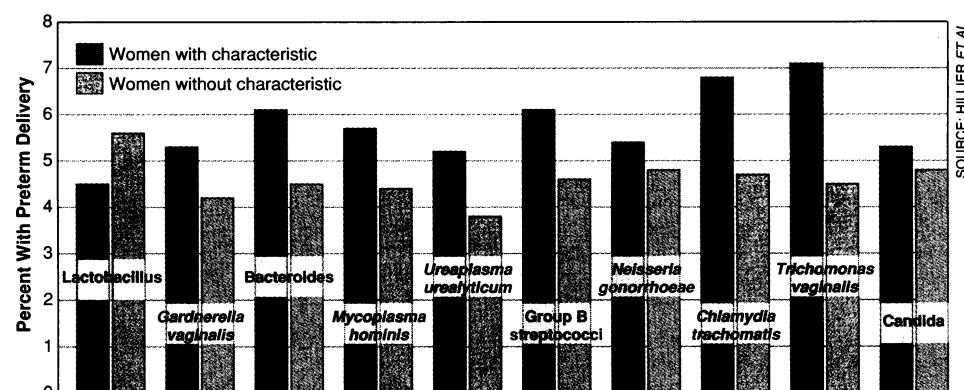
Guarding Against Premature Birth

BOSTON—Each week of pregnancy betters a fetus's chances of survival outside the womb. Babies born prematurely are 120 times more likely to die than those carried to full term, according to Roberto Romero, head of the Perinatology Research Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. So the recent, widely reported finding that bacterial infections of the mother's reproductive tract are one cause of premature birth was welcome news. It suggested that antibiotic treatment of the mother could make a dent in infant mortality rates. But reproduction experts are divided about just what the findings mean for public health measures.

To James MacGregor, a perinatal researcher and infectious-disease specialist at the University of Colorado Health Sciences

Center in Denver, studies published 2 weeks ago in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM) imply that testing for and treating such infections should become "a routine part of pregnancy care." One of the studies, after all, showed that antibiotic treatment of infected pregnant women can reduce these women's rate of premature delivery by more than one third. But that step may not be enough. Another research group, reporting in *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, found that one of the most common agents infecting the reproductive tract is hard to eliminate during pregnancy and may require large-scale screening and treatment even before conception.

Researchers had long suspected that reproductive-tract infections played a role in prematurity. Now, in one NEJM report—the largest study to date of infection and pre-



Microbes and prematurity. When the vagina's lactobacilli are replaced by more virulent species, preterm delivery rises. All but streptococci, *Trichomonas*, and candida are found in bacterial vaginosis.