

ITALY

Reform Begins With New CNR Head

VENICE—Last week, Italy's science minister, Luigi Berlinguer, appointed a relatively unknown academic, informatics engineer Lucio Bianco, to head the National Research Council (CNR). Bianco has worked for the CNR—the government's chief research-funding agency—for 25 years and is currently director of the council's Institute of Systems Analysis and Informatics in Rome and a lecturer in operational research at the University of Rome "Tor Vergata."

Such an appointment would not normally excite much comment outside the scientific community, but it prompted strong reaction in national newspapers. The reason? Just days earlier, Parliament approved a law that gives Berlinguer more authority and requires his ministry for universities and research (MURST) to draw up within 1 year legislation to reform the scientific infrastructure. Berlinguer told *Science* his first target for reform is the CNR, and Bianco's appointment is part of his master plan.

Berlinguer says that he has radical plans for the CNR, which has 350 institutes scattered around the country, including groups within the universities. "A large part of CNR research is done in the universities ... but we want CNR to have a different mission," he says. Berlinguer says he wants the council to reduce its role in university-based research and concentrate on its own institutes, establishing a more coordinated network of centers and putting more emphasis on targeted projects, or *progetti finalizzati*, involving CNR institutes, universities, and industry. CNR has already been moving in this direction, but Berlinguer wants it to go further: "CNR should not be carrying out basic research, but applied," he says. In this context, he considers Bianco "perfect, since he has long experience in applied research."

Most researchers agree that CNR is ripe for reform. The work of the council's scattered institutes is said to be poorly coordinated; its funding policies have frequently been criticized for spreading funds too thinly; and the 15 national committees, each covering a field such as mathematics or chemistry, are seen as too isolated from each other. "The committees will be one of the big issues [of the reforms]," says Glauco Tocchini-Valentini, director of the CNR Cell Biology Institute in Rome. Also troubling for many researchers is CNR's dual role as administrator of its own institutes and a dispenser of grants to both its own centers and the universities. "Some people



New powers. Science Minister Luigi Berlinguer.

think these two activities should be split, leaving CNR just operating its own research centers," says Tocchini-Valentini.

Researchers have mixed feelings about Berlinguer's planned reforms, however. Lucio Doretti, director of the CNR Research Area in Padua, sees the shift toward applied research as a positive move, "since it could be a means of obtaining more funding [from industry]." The director of one CNR physics institute in Rome, who asked not to be

named, is not so enthusiastic, saying that "CNR does a lot of good basic research."

Berlinguer's choice of Bianco has also drawn some political flak. Bianco's brother is chair of one of the political parties of the leftist majority, the Popular Party, and the

appointment was condemned as a political move by the national daily *La Repubblica*. "Today is a black day for Italian research," added Fiorello Cortiana, head of the Italian Senate's education and research committee.

Next on the list of Berlinguer's reforms in the coming year is the ENEA, which supports research in a broad range of fields linked largely to its past as a nuclear agency. Accused by past governments of being inefficient, the agency is suffering something of an identity crisis because it is answerable to MURST and the ministries for industry and the environment. "We don't know who our boss is," complains a senior ENEA official. Berlinguer says he has no clear view as yet of ENEA's future.

Although Berlinguer has only a year to work out his reforms—most likely against stiff opposition—Italy's science minister appears buoyant. "It is a very short time scale," he says, "[but] the point is, we have the power to do it."

—Susan Biggin

Susan Biggin is a science writer in Venice.

RADIATION PROTECTION

France Distributes Iodine Near Reactors

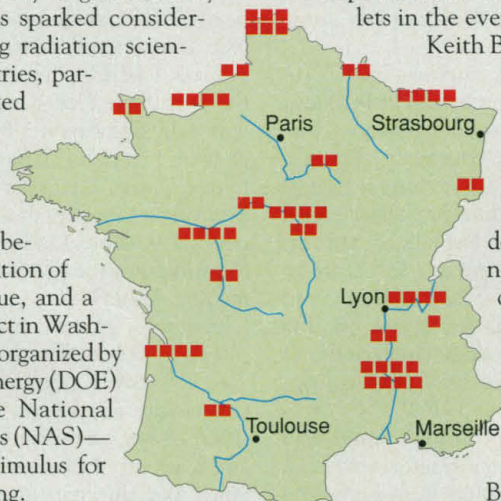
PARIS—Last week, French Health Minister Hervé Gaymard announced that local authorities will begin distributing potassium iodide (KI) tablets to approximately 600,000 people living within 10 kilometers of 24 nuclear installations, including France's 20 nuclear power facilities. In the event of a nuclear accident, the residents would take the tablets to saturate their thyroid glands with a stable isotope of iodine and thereby block the uptake of radioactive iodine isotopes, byproducts of nuclear fission that could cause thyroid cancer.

The decision in France—where 77% of the nation's electricity is generated by nuclear power—has sparked considerable interest among radiation scientists in other countries, particularly the United States, where stable iodine is not generally made available to the public. Some U.S. experts believe that a reevaluation of this policy is overdue, and a meeting on the subject in Washington on 7 April—organized by the Department of Energy (DOE) and hosted by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS)—may provide the stimulus for just such a rethinking.

A major impetus for these developments has been the alarmingly high number of thy-

roid cancer cases among children who were living near the Chernobyl nuclear power plant at the time of the 26 April 1986 accident. Radiation scientists believe these cases are due primarily to exposure to radioactive iodine (*Science*, 19 April 1996, p. 357), and the fact that the cancer toll is many times higher than had been predicted has led many experts to conclude that children's thyroids are much more sensitive to radiation than was previously realized. As a result, the World Health Organization (WHO) has already recommended that all schoolchildren in Europe have immediate access to KI tablets in the event of an accident.

Keith Baverstock, a WHO radiation scientist based in Rome, says the agency made its recommendation after it became clear that the thyroid cancer epidemic caused by Chernobyl extends hundreds of kilometers from the plant. "No child could be so far away from a nuclear facility that they would not need access to these tablets," Baverstock says. Martin Schlumberger, a thyroid cancer expert at the Gustave-Roussy In-



Nuclear nation. France's 59 reactors at 20 sites make it highly reliant on nuclear power.