FRANCE

New CNRS Chief Gets Marching Orders

PARIS—Geochemist Claude Allègre, France's new minister for education and research, is hoping this week to kick off his promised campaign to re-energize French science by appointing physicist Catherine Bréchignac as the first woman director-general of France's giant research agency, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). As *Science* went to press, the Council of Ministers of the new Socialist government was expected to approve the appointment at its 16 July meeting. Bréchignac, highly respected as both a researcher and an administrator, will be charged by Allègre with slimming down the CNRS's weighty bureaucracy and attracting more young scientists into its ranks, in what many see as the first step in a far-reaching shake-up of French scientific institutions.

New broom. Physicist Catherine Bréchignac.

The CNRS, with 11,600 researchers and a $2.45 billion annual budget, is France's largest public research agency and the backbone of its fundamental research effort. Bréchignac will replace Guy Aubert, whose term as CNRS director-general expires on 18 July. Aubert was appointed by the previous conservative government and was closely associated with its budget-pruning policies. Bréchignac's appointment was warmly welcomed by colleagues who spoke to *Science*. "Her scientific qualifications are incontestable," says Michel Broyer, director of the CNRS's Ionic and Molecular Spectrometry unit at the University of Lyons. Mathematician Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, director of the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques near Paris, adds that Bréchignac "is an extremely direct woman, who presents her point of view but is capable of listening to others and changing her mind if she is convinced."

Bréchignac, who has an international scientific reputation in the field of atomic clusters, is no stranger to the CNRS administration. In 1995, after 6 years as director of the Aimé Cotton physics laboratory at the University of Paris's Orsay campus, she was named scientific director of the CNRS's physics and mathematics department. Bourguignon says that during her tenure as department chief, Bréchignac "always gave priority to research. ... She is passionately engaged in science."

Bréchignac will need to muster all her administrative skills to fulfill what the government expects her to do as the new CNRS head. Geophysicist Vincent Courtillot, Allègre's chief adviser, says that she will soon be receiving a detailed "assignment letter" from Allègre, spelling out an ambitious program of changes at the agency. One of her first tasks will be to ask the scientific directors of all seven departments to resign. Although many of them may be reappointed to the new team, in some cases new people will be asked to take over. Bréchignac will also be expected to carry out a sweeping program of "debureaucratization" at the agency. "The central administration of the CNRS is too fat and complex," Courtillot says. "We are thinking of cutting down by a factor of 2." Similarly, the plethora of committees and meetings that fill researchers' time will also be drastically reduced. At present, "any ranking scientist over 45 thinks he must be on a plane traveling to a meeting in Paris twice a week," says Courtillot. "This is a disaster."

Another major priority for the new director-general will be to recruit young scientists to gradually replace the CNRS's aging scientific talent pool. Allègre had earlier announced his intention to end a freeze on scientific employment and to hire several thousand young researchers in the universities and public research agencies, beginning this autumn (*Science*, 13 June, p. 1638). Moreover, Courtillot says, the government expects the CNRS and other agencies to do more to accommodate researchers from the universities and industry who want to spend time in CNRS labs, and vice versa. Another possible change, which is certain to be controversial, is to limit how long senior scientists are encouraged to do research. "We are not so sure all of them should expect to continue in a full-time research career," says Courtillot.

But one change that will be welcome to many researchers is a reversal of the previous government's policy of earmarking large sums of money for special programs and projects, often at the expense of individual labs. "We want the CNRS to restore funding to the labs, so they can function on the philosophy that you can't program discoveries," Courtillot says. "A research policy does not consist of programs, but of hiring high-quality scientists. When you hire someone good, you've made your research policy for the next 20 years."

–Michael Balter

GENETIC RESEARCH

Clinton Backs Broad Genetic Safeguards

In an effort to prevent the misuse of human genetic data—and remove a potential roadblock from some types of genetic research—President Clinton this week urged Congress to pass a new federal law forbidding discrimination based on a person's genes. Speaking to a select audience of Administration officials, legislators, and health care activists at the White House on 14 July, Clinton said he wants to make it illegal for any health insurance company to deny coverage to a healthy person simply because medical data indicate that the person is at risk for an inherited disease. He said he will join forces with a bipartisan group in Congress to write legislation to that effect.

"It is wrong for an insurance company to use genetic information to deny coverage," Clinton said, adding that "we cannot allow our progress in science to be undermined" by concerns over the misuse of genetic data. Clinton said that people are so worried that negative genetic test results will cause them to lose insurance coverage that many are afraid to participate in genetic research.

Although the president did not release the text of his proposed legislation, he said that he aims to build upon several existing bills, including the Kassebaum-Kennedy package that became law in 1996. That legislation makes it illegal for anyone who provides group health insurance to deny coverage on the basis of genetic information. According to a White House information sheet, the president would like to extend this protection to people who buy individual policies. He would also like to make it illegal for companies to raise premiums on the basis of genetic data.

In addition to banning discrimination, Clinton is calling for new regulatory controls to prevent the "inappropriate disclosure of genetic information." Although the details are yet to be worked out, a White House statement says the president would like to protect privacy by "preventing health plans from releasing or demanding access to genetic information" without the consent of clients. He would specifically limit the sharing of genetic data among insurance providers and authorize the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services

to prohibit other types of data transfer as necessary. Some researchers are concerned that draconian privacy rules could interfere with the flow of research data. But the Administration promises to provide "safe harbors" for "beneficial uses" of genetic data, "including for important biomedical research efforts."

This package of not-fully-defined ideas was put together on short notice, according to congressional staffers. "It all happened on Tuesday night [8 July]," says a Senate aide, "when the White House called saying, 'We want you to look at this bill and introduce it on Monday [14 July].' " It did not get introduced in the Senate. Instead, Administration staffers now say they plan to cooperate with members of Congress to improve existing or pending legislation—such as a proposal originally introduced in 1995 by Representative Louise Slaughter (D–NY). It has been reintroduced in the House as HR 306 and has won 135 co-sponsors. Senator Olympia Snowe (R–ME) introduced a companion bill in the Senate and may do so again. In a minor coup for the Administration, two Senate Republican leaders—James Jeffords (R–VT), chair of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, and William Frist (R–TN), chair of the Subcommittee on Public Health and Safety—said they support the president's goals and will include them in legislation.

However, one ambitious, genetic privacy bill that proposed to put extensive controls on the collection and use of genetic data—introduced by Senator Pete Domenici (R–NM)—has been quietly pulled back for an overhaul. Biotech outfits and basic researchers alike protested its broad reach, says a Domenici staffer. As a result, the "snags" are now being removed.

A key problem that surfaced in the Domenici bill—and one that may haunt the Administration proposal as well—is the question of what is meant by the term "genetic information." It has not been spelled out as yet, but if the proposed legislation adopts a very broad definition, Congress may soon find itself debating big changes in the way medical records are handled. A Frist staffer predicts that hearings on protecting genetic data will begin in the Senate this fall.

–Eliot Marshall

MALARIA RESEARCH

Global Initiative Takes Shape Slowly

THE HAGUE—Leaders of the world's wealthiest biomedical and financial aid organizations met here last week to discuss how they might pay for a new assault on malaria, a disease that kills more than 2 million people a year. The meeting followed the lead of a gathering of scientists, held last January in Dakar, Senegal, which called for a cooperative effort to aid scientists and build up research networks in Africa. The U.S. participants were eager to create a "common pot" of funds, as National Institutes of Health (NIH) director Harold Varmus said last winter (*Science*, 17 January, p. 299). Varmus was also interested in joint peer review.

Both ideas received a cool reception at The Hague. The meeting-goers made no funding decisions, continuing this Multilateral Initiative on Malaria (MIM) strictly as a planning effort. Representatives of major organizations departed with promises to "improve communication and coordination," as a communiqué stated. While the participants made no firm commitments, many were, at least, encouraged by the involvement of big-league development agencies—including the World Bank—which are seeking ways to engage industry in the battle against malaria.

Varmus had pushed initially for quicker action, asking agencies to "take risks ... on interagency funding" of research through schemes that would be "not permanent, but experimental." He also suggested "coordinated peer review of subsets of the research enterprise." In support, meeting co-organizer Barend Mons of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research noted that "we research managers are lagging 10 years behind the scientists." He said, "We need to work to share resources like the scientists do." However, Robert Howells of the Wellcome Trust countered these suggestions, pointing out that "collaboration and cooperation are a reality at the level of the investigator" already, because "over 80% of Wellcome Trust–supported investigators also receive funding from other agencies."

Shared peer review also met resistance on the grounds that it would be too cumbersome. George Radda of the U.K. Medical Research Council and Mark de Bruycker of the European Commission raised both legal and practical difficulties. Some scientists also argued against such moves: Bruno Gryseels, director of the Prince Leopold Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp, Belgium, felt that "momentum would suffer" if agencies agreed to "installing another administrative, secretariat, or triage level without any increase of funds."

Organizers of the Dakar meeting last winter had encouraged African researchers to send letters of interest describing ideas deserving support. Although NIH officials had hoped to review and take joint action on the letters this summer, that now seems unlikely. Tore Godal of the World Health Organization has agreed to coordinate a response to the applicants, and the communiqué says that the letters will be used to develop workshops on projects focused on individual proposals. A planning group will continue to explore mechanisms of collaboration.

Researchers said they were heartened to see major pharmaceutical company officials at the meeting, although industry has invested relatively little in antimalarial vaccines or drugs. According to Jerry Sadoff of Merck & Co. in Whitehouse Station, New Jersey, however, companies are still waiting to be convinced that new products can be made efficiently and that there would be "a guaranteed marketplace" for them.

Ok Pannenborg of the World Bank and David Namarro of the U.K. Department of International Development said that their agencies may be prepared to become involved at two levels to help win over industry: in upstream subsidies for drug development and in lending money to buyers specifically to purchase new products at reduced prices. But overcoming industry skepticism will continue to be a challenge.

For now, MIM will operate as "a loose confederation," says John LaMontagne of NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Before leaving The Hague, participants made some new pledges. The U.S. National Library of Medicine's Elliot Siegel, along with other aid agencies, volunteered to develop a strategy for Internet connectivity for major African institutes. The Malaria Foundation of New York offered to develop a public relations strategy. Pannenborg committed the World Bank to undertaking a macroeconomic and marketing analysis for new antimalarial products. And all agreed to meet again under the auspices of the Wellcome Trust—probably in the United Kingdom 6 months hence—to continue these discussions.

CNRI/PHOTOTAKE/PNI

Prime target. Malaria parasite *Plasmodium falciparum* is the focus of vaccine and drug research.

–Richard Gallagher

With additional reporting by Eliot Marshall.