

## RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

### Crackdown by Japan's Universities?

University years in Japan have traditionally served not so much to educate as to provide a respite between the years-long student ordeal of cramming for the notoriously competitive entrance exams and adult life in the corporate world. Once enrolled, a university student faces an easy ride: There is little homework, few reports are required, professors rarely track attendance, and it is almost impossible to flunk out.

This may change, however, as an advisory council last week urged universities to tighten up grading practices and graduation requirements. The report from the University Council, an advisory body to Monbusho, the science and education ministry, calls for raising research and educational

standards, partly through more objective assessments of students and faculty. "Previously, the quality of a university graduate was judged not by what they had learned but by what university they graduated from," it says.

To address this, the report urges that attendance, class participation, and midterm exams and reports figure into course grades, which are now typically based only on a final exam or report. It also urges the adoption of a grade-point average system to create an overall student performance measure. This could provide a mechanism for raising minimum graduation requirements; now, even straight-D students get diplomas. The council also calls for Monbusho to set up an outside body to evaluate universities' educational programs.

The 226-page report con-

tains a host of other recommendations for making Japanese universities competitive in the coming century. It says, for example, that they should focus on areas of particular strength and should put more emphasis on continuing education programs.

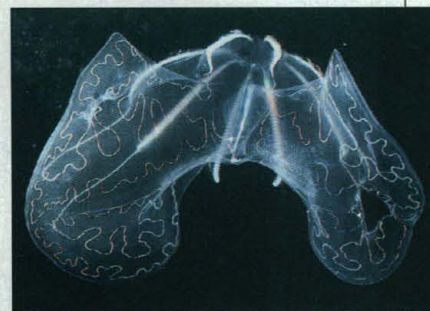
Shinichi Yamamoto, director of the University of Tsukuba's

Research Center for University Studies, says new quality-control measures "could be a good thing educationally," but that introducing meaningful evaluations will require overcoming a cultural reluctance to objectively critique individuals or institutions. "It's questionable whether Japanese society can change that suddenly," he says.

### Beauty From the Deep

This deep-sea comb jelly (ctenophore) was spotted 900 meters under the Caribbean near St. Croix as it floated past the submersible *Johnson Sea-Link*. It's one of 24 photos taken by marine researchers around the world that form an exhibit at the U.S. National Academy of Sciences.

Running through November, it supplements an academy symposium last week celebrating 50 years of ocean discovery.



### Gene Regulation Work Earns Chemistry Prize

The Houston-based Welch Foundation, which gives an annual \$300,000 award that usually recognizes the lifetime achievements of a U.S. chemist, decided this year to honor a Frenchman:

Pierre Chambon of the Institute of Genetics and Molecular and Cellular Biology in Strasbourg. Chambon, whose award was announced last week, "has been at the forefront" in much of molecular biology,

says molecular biologist Steve McKnight of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. "Every time this field has made a big step forward, he was right there." During his 40-year career, Chambon was the first to show that eukaryotic cells use three enzymes to transcribe DNA into RNA, while bacteria

use just one. He was among the first to recognize that eukaryotic genes have noncoding regions, called introns. His team is best known for its discovery of steroid nuclear receptors, which act with steroids such as estrogen and progesterone to regulate gene expression.

Chambon now studies how retinoic acid controls cell function and differentiation. "It's a way of bridging structural biology and biochemistry with developmental biology," he says. Until recently, "this was a total unknown. But now we've learned so much that we can make a good guess at how [genes] work."

The Welch Foundation was established in 1954 by oil man Robert Alonzo Welch and has given this award since 1972.



Chambon

In a highly unusual enforcement action, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) suspended federal support of new research for 5 days last week at a major Chicago hospital for violations of rules to protect human subjects.

The Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's Medical Center was blocked from getting funds on 23 October, on orders from the Office of Protection From Research Risks (OPRR), which enforces the rules for HHS and other agencies. The shutdown went into force 2 days after OPRR visited the hospital to check on complaints. After officials scurried to rectify problems, the ban was lifted 28 October.

In its report, the OPRR identified 17 apparent violations, including making consent forms optional for low-risk research.

### Hospital Failed On Human Research Policy

It said that a review of the hospital's Institutional Review Board (IRB) records indicated that it conducted "little substantive review" of proposed experiments. OPRR also found that the chair of the IRB, cancer researcher Janet Wolter, routinely presented her own research proposals and took part in meetings at which they were approved. Federal guidelines recommend that IRB members leave the room when their proposals come up for a vote.

Rush spokesperson John Pontarelli says all these problems have been "corrected." Wolter has stepped down as chair of the IRB, and the board has been "nearly doubled" to include laypersons. Meanwhile, says Pontarelli, the board has begun to rereview 1500 research proposals.