

Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Radiation Research Shake-up

A 40-year-old tradition in radiation research is about to come to an end with an agreement between the managers of the nuclear weapons program at the Department of Energy (DOE) and public health officials at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

In a move aimed at winning public confidence in scientific data that come out of the nuclear weapons program, DOE Secretary James Watkins agreed last month to relinquish jurisdiction over research on the health hazards posed by radiation leaks and occupational exposure at government nuclear facilities. DOE will continue to fund this work and monitor the health of its employees, but the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta now has authority to design long-term epidemiological studies on radiation effects, select

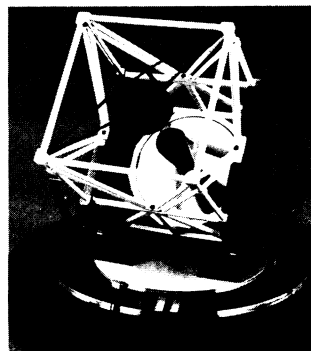
contractors who will analyze the data, and disseminate the results.

DOE and its predecessor, the Atomic Energy Commission, have been criticized for being both the manager and safety inspector of the nation's bomb plants. Some epidemiologists also claimed the agency used secrecy rules to bar access to important data. The new policy is in line with advice from a panel that Watkins appointed last year (*Science*, 23 March 1990, p. 1404).

It's not yet clear how the change will affect the dozens of researchers who have been analyzing radiation data for DOE over the years. About \$15-million worth of contracts are involved, including major projects at Hanford, Oak Ridge, and Los Alamos national laboratories.

UK Antes Up for Telescopes

U.S. astronomers, who have been queuing up in longer and longer lines to use national observatories, have for years been seeking money to build a pair of



Model of twin telescope.

8-meter optical/infrared telescopes on mountain tops in Chile and Hawaii. Now, the twin telescopes have inched a bit closer to reality with the announcement that the United Kingdom will pay one-quarter of the construction cost.

The long-awaited agreement came after Frederick M. Bernthal, acting director of the National Science Foundation, met in England with the Science and Engineering Research Council, which agreed to provide \$44 million of the \$176-million price tag. Congress voted last year to pay half the cost of the telescopes if foreign partners could be found to kick in. Canadian astronomers are expected to provide the other \$44 million.

It will be some time before the new telescopes see the light. Construction of the Hawaii instrument on Mauna Kea, to begin this year, is to be completed in 1995. The second telescope—at Cerro Pachon, Chile—will not be completed before 1998. The telescopes, the first optical instruments financed by NSF in more than 15 years, will be the world's most powerful ground-based optical observatories.

George Mason to Set Up Think Tank

George Mason University, an up-and-coming institution in Northern Virginia with 20,000 students, has received a bequest potentially worth \$20 million to start a center loosely modeled on the famed Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

The donation is from the estate of Shelley Krasnow, founder of a Virginia company that manufactures electrical generators, who died in 1989. It will be used to establish the Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study, designed to accommodate 15 scholars with multi-year appointments, plus up to 100 visiting scholars and research assistants. George Mason senior vice president J. Wade Gilley says the institute will probably be strong on Chinese and Soviet studies but will be "wide open" to deep thinkers in all areas. Krasnow, he says, was particularly keen on interdisciplinary fields such as bioinformatics.

The university has announced construction of \$4-million worth of new buildings will begin next summer, with the first scholars to be recruited for the fall of 1992. Gilley says the annual budget will start at \$5 million and, with luck, may go as high as \$15 million.

George Mason officials may be counting their chickens prematurely, according to *The Washington Post*: The bulk of the \$20-million bequest is supposed to come from the sale of land owned by Krasnow, but, as it is presently zoned, the land is worth much less.

Private Initiative on Fetal Research

Stepping into the "scientific and moral vacuum" created by government inaction, two medical organizations are establishing a National Advisory Board on Ethics in Reproduction to set guidelines and oversee activities involving fetal tissue research and transplantation. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) and the American Fertility Society announced their move on 7 January. This is "the first time that any group has made a commitment to monitor this growing area of medical research in the United States," said Kenneth Ryan of ACOG, who is chairman of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Harvard Medical School.

The societies noted that the United States stands virtually

alone among developed nations in failing to develop guidelines on the new technologies. The government abdicated a leadership role in 1980 when the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) failed to reestablish its Ethics Advisory Board. Federal funding of research on transplanting fetal tissue from induced abortions has been banned since March 1988. The following December, a National Institutes of Health panel—co-

chaired by ACOG's Ryan—recommended lifting the ban, but HHS secretary Louis Sullivan extended it, arguing that such research could encourage abortions.

The board, yet to be appointed, will include 15 representatives from law, ethics, religion, public policy, and medicine. Taking a poke at the Administration's difficulties in finding politically suitable candidates for high-level health posts, Ryan said: "We do not intend to apply a litmus test" with regard to members' beliefs on abortion.



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Vacuum fillers. *American Fertility Society's Howard W. Jones, Jr. of Eastern Virginia Medical School and Kenneth Ryan of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.*