

## AIR QUALITY

## Bad News on Second-Hand Smoke

For years, many epidemiologists have had a gut feeling that second-hand tobacco smoke can cause lung cancer and other respiratory diseases in nonsmokers, but they've been hesitant to label environmental tobacco smoke a clear-cut carcinogen. The reason? Almost everyone is exposed to whiffs of cigarette smoke from time to time, making it hard for epidemiologists to tease out any effects of secondary smoke from those of a host of other potential hazards. Last week, however, the gut feeling gained a scientific imprimatur. An outside panel of scientists convened by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved crucial elements of a draft review concluding that "passive smoking" does indeed cause lung cancer. Final approval of the draft by EPA administrator William Reilly is expected to come by December, at which point second-hand smoke will be labeled a known human carcinogen.

What the panel, the indoor-air committee of the EPA's Science Advisory Board, accepted at its meeting in Crystal City, Virginia, is a better substantiated version of a draft it torpedoed in April 1991. The new report, prepared by agency and contract researchers, fingers environmental tobacco smoke as the cause of between 2500 and 3300 lung cancer deaths a year in former smokers and people who've never smoked. In addition, it blames such smoke for 150,000 to 300,000 lower respiratory tract infections a year in children less than 18 months old. And it charges that second-hand smoke worsens asthma in some children.

To fashion that indictment, admits Jennifer Jinot, an EPA health scientist who wrote part of the draft, she and her colleagues engaged in some fancy statistical footwork. In their evaluation, she says, they ended up using "total weight of evidence." Besides relying on 30 epidemiological studies, most of which found adverse effects, her team was persuaded by several suggesting that higher doses of secondary smoke cause more cases of lung cancer. Then, too, there was the chemical reality that environmental smoke and the smoke inhaled by smokers share many of the same carcinogens.

Consultants to the tobacco industry are unhappy, of course. The tobacco industry had dispatched no fewer than nine consultants to convince the board that the review is flawed—to no avail. Now these consultants charge that the agency scientists' fancy footwork strayed out of bounds on several counts. "Environmental tobacco smoke data have been massaged to an extraordinary extent," says John Todhunter, a consultant at Washington, D.C.-based SRS International, who criticized the review on behalf of the Tobacco Institute. And even if the EPA's assessment is on target, Todhunter stresses, the risk is relatively small

compared to that of other EPA-designated human carcinogens.

Still, officials at the Tobacco Institute take a sanguine pose, saying that they aren't worried about the document's potential impact on regulation. "I don't think it will change the scheme of things," says Brennan Dawson, vice president of the Tobacco Institute. That's hardly what most health policy experts believe, however. They say that once the report is finalized, its conclusions—particularly secondary smoke's label as a known human carcinogen—might force more widespread workplace regulation of tobacco smoke by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). "The EPA review will go a long way in giving OSHA the political support it needs to do a standard," says Debra Janes, an OSHA health scientist who is preparing a memorandum suggesting various options for regulating indoor-air quality in nonindustrial workplaces.

The prospect of OSHA action may be lighting a fire under the publicly unconcerned Tobacco Institute. Says Dawson, the institute is



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Smart move? EPA sizes up the risk.

"analyzing new options." Could one be litigation to block the report? She won't rule it out. Antismoking activists, meanwhile, are stepping up their campaigns to rid public places of tobacco smoke. "We're spreading the news throughout the legal community," says John Banzhaf, director of Washington, D.C.-based Action on Smoking and Health, who predicts that antismoking lawyers soon will feast on secondary smoke's beefed-up, bad-boy status.

—Richard Stone

## EUROPE

## Frustrated EMBL Chief Resigns

You're head of a lab that's ranked second in its field in Europe, with 3 years left in your contract—why not rest on your laurels and settle in for a quiet run to retirement? Not Lennart Philipson, director of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg. First he set before EMBL's 15 member states an ambitious vision of the laboratory's future; then, when they balked at the cost, Philipson threw in the towel, complaining of a "vote of no confidence."

Philipson's friends say they aren't shocked by the news—he usually backs his strong opinions with equally forthright action, they say. But his decision to leave EMBL next April puts the lab's governing council in a fix: Candidates for the top EMBL job were never easy to find, and the acrimony surrounding Philipson's departure will make the headhunters' task doubly difficult.

The row centers on Philipson's 5-year plan to expand EMBL's budget by 15% to 20% above inflation. In particular, Philipson announced more than 2 years ago that he wanted to add 10 staff scientists to EMBL's 20-person outstation in Grenoble. His goal? To ensure that EMBL cashes in on the boost to structural biology that should come from the 1994 opening of the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility in that city. A good idea in principle, agreed EMBL's overseers, but they've been debating the cost ever since. EMBL's budget rules demand unanimous agreement from the

member states, and the council still had not agreed to fund the project by its last meeting on 8 July. That was the last straw for Philipson.

EMBL staff aren't panicking yet about Philipson's departure. But Thomas Graf, coordinator of EMBL's differentiation research program, warns that a replacement must be found quickly. "Not every decision can be taken by a committee," he says. One pressing issue is the rapid growth of EMBL's DNA sequence data library, now doubling in size every 18 months. To reduce the drain on EMBL's resources, there are plans to convert the library into an independent European Bioinformatics Institute—but it will take sensitive negotiations to win funding for the project from the European Community.

Philipson's hope is that EMBL's member states might actually react in a positive way to his sudden announcement. "I've done this in order to precipitate a change in the budget principles," he says. His prescription: EMBL's budget should be agreed upon by a two-thirds majority vote, rather than by unanimity. Typically, Philipson is predicting dire consequences if his call for change goes unheeded: "It may take 10 years to build up a first-class research center, but it may only take months to destroy it," reads his resignation statement. Strong words, but with many of EMBL's member countries feeling the pinch of recession, they may not be enough.

—Peter Aldhous