

Bilateral Vietnam study plans to assess war fallout of dioxin

Rex Dalton, San Diego

Researchers from the United States and Vietnam met this week in Hawaii to finalize field-testing methods for the nations' first bilateral research project on dioxin pollution from the defoliant Agent Orange.

The scientists plan to begin sampling soil throughout Vietnam this winter to create

a database for research on the health and environmental impacts of dioxins spread by the US military during the Vietnam War.

"This research programme can be a benefit to the whole world," says Christopher Portier, director of environmental toxicology at the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), which is planning the project. "But it first must be beneficial to the Vietnamese."

An international conference on dioxin and other herbicides is set to take place in Hanoi in March. Preliminary results from initial testing may be available for that meeting, officials say.

More than 30 years ago, the US military used Agent Orange as a defoliant on vast stretches of Vietnamese jungle. Aeroplane spraying, along with dioxin dumping and storage facilities, left many 'hot spots' where chemical pollution is thought to be extensive.

Individual researchers from the United States, Canada and other countries have found that dioxin residue has polluted food supplies, including fish. Subsequent studies have shown that those eating the fish have high levels of dioxins, which can cause cancer, immune disorders and birth defects.

During the past two years, the NIEHS and the US Environmental Protection Agency have worked to develop a \$400,000 research project designed to provide a comprehensive overview of dioxin in Vietnam (see *Nature* 406, 818; 2000).

Eviction threat to Belgium's science academies

Quirin Schiermeier, Munich

Belgian scientists are on a collision course with their government over plans to evict the country's science academies from their home in central Brussels.

The Palace of the Academies, built in the 1820s and considered an outstanding example of the architecture of the time, houses the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts (KVAB) and its French-speaking equivalent, the Royal Academy of Science, Literature and Arts of Belgium.

Members of the academies first discovered the government's plan to take back their building in July. "We got the news from a television report," says Niceas Schamp, an organic chemist at Ghent University and permanent secretary of the KVAB. "There was no warning, nobody was informed and no consultations were held with the management of the academies."

The KVAB is currently attempting to convince the government to abandon its plan. A statement drafted last month, calling on Patrick Dewael, prime minister of the regional government of Flanders, to oppose the move, has received 900 signatures, mainly from academy members.

Schamp says the threatened move would be a "humiliating loss of status" to his organization. The palace currently serves as a meeting and working place for eminent scientists and artists.



Deadly action: spraying with Agent Orange some 30 years ago left many 'hot spots' of pollution.

Doctors propose panel on research misconduct

Erica Klarreich, London

British physicians are proposing the formation of a national panel to handle investigations of misconduct in biomedical research.

The panel — suggested by doctors' organizations in the absence of any government plan for such a body — would also provide research institutions with guidelines for good scientific practice and advice for dealing with misconduct allegations.

The plan would tackle what its proposers see as a serious anomaly in current investigations of biomedical-misconduct investigations. Currently, physicians engaged in research are subject to investigation by the General Medical Council, whereas scientists conducting similar work are not monitored by any national body.

The proposal stems from a conference in

November 1999 involving the Royal physicians' colleges of Edinburgh, Glasgow and London, and their joint Faculty of Pharmaceutical Medicine. The recommendations will be discussed at a London meeting of COPE, an organization of biomedical-journal editors, on 15 October.

"We felt that there were sufficient instances of institutions having problems handling this locally that they need a larger body to turn to for advice and perhaps external inspections," says Gordon Lowe of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, who helped to draw up the plans.

The physicians hope that the panel will include members from academic, medical and industrial backgrounds. Its main focus would be to help institutions to set their own guidelines and conduct investigations, Lowe says, but it might also investigate certain

cases itself. The proposal's backers want government funding to support the panel, and plan to hold talks with government officials in Edinburgh and London to seek such support.

Not everyone is happy with the idea of a UK national body to oversee only biomedical research, however. "We need a central government body that integrates all the sciences and engineering, instead of having bits and pieces done in an ad hoc manner by various bodies," says Raymond Spier, an ethicist at the University of Surrey.

A recent Wellcome Trust plan for handling scientific misconduct was hailed by some observers as a unifying force for misconduct investigations in the United Kingdom, but it will apply only to research funded by the trust (see *Nature* 412, 667; 2001).