

## Max Planck institutes face broad cuts, but two escape closure

[MUNICH] About one-fifth of the Max Planck Society's research institutes in west Germany face staff cuts in the next few years, according to the society's president, Hubert Markl, speaking after a senate meeting last week. But two new institutes will be established in east Germany, enabling the MPS to reach its target of having 20 per cent of its research strength in the east.

The society's senate agreed the details of staff reductions required to meet government demands to reduce staff numbers by 512 by 2000 (see *Nature* 383, 566; 1996). Only two institutes will be closed completely — the Institute for Biology in Tübingen and the Institute for Behavioural Physiology in Seewiesen, Bavaria — rather than four as initially proposed.

The Institute for Aeronomy in Lindau, Lower Saxony, will have its staff numbers and budget halved over the next decade. But it will survive as a smaller institute, with two departments focusing on planetary and solar physics. The Institute of History in Göttingen will be saved thanks to the social sciences section of the MPS, which has found a way of sharing the required 50 job losses across several institutes.

## Fisheries row looms at North Sea meeting

[LONDON] A conflict of interest between European Union fisheries and environment ministries is threatening to neutralize a special joint ministerial meeting in Bergen, Norway, this week to discuss the environmental implications of overfishing in the North Sea. Specific wording on measures, targets and timetables to tackle overfishing is understood to have been removed from the draft conclusions.

Environment ministers are understood to want prompt action to regulate fishing gear, to reduce the quantity of unwanted species caught, and to designate 'protected areas' where fishing is banned. But fisheries departments and the European Commission, are known to favour including such measures within an expanded Common Fisheries Policy, which is due for review in 2002. (See Briefing, pages 105–110).

## Industry excels in life sciences citations

[LONDON] Publications resulting from life sciences research sponsored by private industry are more highly cited than UK research as a whole in the field, according to a report published last week by the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of

Sussex. The report, *The changing shape of British industrial research*, contradicts claims that the commercial sponsorship of research stifles open publication. Indeed, it notes that some British companies publish more scientific papers than many universities.

An analysis of papers with at least one author from industry published between 1981 and 1994 found a significant increase in publications in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology fields, but a reduction in the electricity and electronics sectors. That partly reflects reduced government spending on military research and development.

## Minister admits he misled over Gulf War research

[LONDON] A British defence minister has admitted to misleading parliament while giving answers to questions about 'Gulf War syndrome'. Earl Howe, a junior defence minister, was asked last year about the cause of death of animals found in the Saudi and Kuwaiti deserts at the end of the Gulf War.

Howe replied that, following an examination of carcasses at the Centre for Tropical Veterinary Medicine at the University of Edinburgh, it had been concluded that the animals had died of natural causes. But internal defence ministry enquiries have since revealed that samples were never sent to Edinburgh. And, in a statement to the House of Lords last week, the minister revealed that no tests had been carried out at any research establishment.

## 'Better security needed' to protect medical data

[WASHINGTON] The United States needs a new set of standards and regulations, as well as more consumer pressure, to remedy an electronic system in which personal medical data is widely available and inadequately safeguarded, the National Research Council reported last week.

The panel's recommendations include the encryption of information transmitted on the Internet, electronic 'firewalls' denying access to unauthorized users of electronic health records, and sanctions for security breaches by authorized users, such as leaving patient information on an unattended computer screen. But critics say that the panel did not go far enough, partly because it did not challenge the idea that widely available electronic health data must be an integral part of an effective and cost-efficient system.

## Italian nominated to lead Europe's space agency

[ROME] The European Space Agency is to have its first Italian director general. A special meeting of the agency's council of ministers

last week agreed to nominate Antonio Rodotà, the 52-year-old head of the Rome-based aerospace company Alenia Spazio, to succeed Jean-Marie Luton when his term of office expires at the end of 1997.

The nomination is expected to be approved at a full meeting of the council next week. Rodotà is an engineer by training and has extensive experience in management within the space industry, where he has a reputation for efficiency. His nomination follows agreement among the agency's four largest member states to support an Italian candidate for director general, a British candidate for the technical services directorate, a German candidate for industrial policy and a French candidate for administrative services. All four posts fall vacant this year.

## Cancer researcher is cleared of misconduct

[WASHINGTON] Bernard Fisher, a cancer researcher at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania, has been told by the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Research Integrity (ORI) that he has been exonerated of charges of scientific misconduct brought by the government in 1994. The charges alleged fraud in a major federally funded breast cancer study.

Fisher came under fire when he headed the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project, which was seeking the best treatment for breast cancer. A collaborator who admitted accepting women not meeting the study's inclusion criteria was found guilty of misconduct by the ORI in 1993. The National Cancer Institute dismissed Fisher after media coverage of the case in 1994. Fisher is suing the government for damage to his reputation.

## Brookhaven lab director announces resignation

[WASHINGTON] Nick Samios has resigned as director of Brookhaven National Laboratory, currently at the centre of controversy following the discovery that tritium was leaking from a research reactor fuel storage vessel (see *Nature* 386, 3; 1997). Samios, 64, announced last week that he will leave the director's post on 30 April. He said that he had informed the laboratory's management contractor, Associated Universities Inc, a year ago of his intention to leave this spring, after 15 years in the post.

Critics of the lab, on Long Island, New York, have been calling for his departure since the leak was reported in January. But Samios' resignation was greeted with dismay at Brookhaven, where his energetic leadership style is credited with the scientific revival of the laboratory. Samios says he will return to research at the laboratory.