

## Probing advisory committees: EPA shows independence

Hearings before a Senate Government Operations subcommittee this year have gradually uncovered a network of "shadow government" by advisory committees to Federal agencies (SN: 7/31/71, p. 82).

This week and last the hearings returned to the subject of advisory committees that deal with environmental and scientific matters. It appeared that the new Environmental Protection Agency and its administrator, William D. Ruckelshaus, may yet retain an exceptional independence from their advisers.

Sen. Lee Metcalf (D-Mont.) and his subcommittee counsel, E. Winslow Turner, sharply questioned EPA's Thomas E. Carroll about various EPA advisory committees. Carroll often was frank—in contrast to earlier witnesses from older agencies—in acknowledging inadequacies of the committees and voicing EPA's apparent resolve to take their advice with a grain of salt or even ignore them.

Much of the colloquy centered on the newly appointed National Research Council committee on auto emissions (SN: 10/2/71, p. 224). The committee was established by Congress to advise EPA on whether to grant extensions to auto companies for meeting 1975 emission standards. The companies can apply for the extensions any time after Jan. 1, 1972; but the NRC committee was established only this September.

"How can [the busy committee members] possibly work night and day in the next three months to be able to come up with anything?" Turner asked.

"We have obviously been interested in answers at the earliest possible date," Carroll commented. "We are dismayed at the delay."

He indicated EPA is dismayed by some other things, too. For instance, EPA had asked for a chance to review candidates for the NRC committee, but, said Carroll, "We were denied this opportunity."

Carroll agreed with a comment by Turner that the committee is deficient in not including economists who could evaluate such matters as the possibility of paying for emission controls by halting annual style changes; he said EPA is therefore making its own economic analysis.

Carroll added that when EPA hires individual consultants, possible conflict of interest questions can be reviewed. The NRC (and its parent, the National Academy of Sciences) are operating under contract to EPA but the Federal agency has been given no such opportunity for review.

In view of these objections, EPA has

come up with a simple expedient for dealing with the NRC committee: Ignore it, if necessary. EPA is now making its own independent analysis of the auto companies' ability to meet the standards, says Carroll.

If EPA ignores the NRC committee, it will not be the first time it has taken such action with an advisory group. A Science Advisory Panel to EPA claimed that the herbicide 2,4,5-T was safe for use; EPA refused to heed its recommendations. But Carroll and lawyer Harrison Wellford of Ralph Nader's Center for the Study of Responsive Law disagreed as to how this happened.

Wellford claimed the panel's report was leaked to anti-2,4,5-T scientists such as Dr. Samuel Epstein (SN: 6/26/71, p. 134), who say the herbicide may be mutagenic, carcinogenic or teratogenic. Wellford said Epstein and others then made their disagreement public in a press conference, and that EPA was forced to act. But Carroll claimed EPA knew all along that the panel—which was originally named by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, before EPA came into existence—was biased, and that Ruckelshaus acted against its recommendations on his own.

Whatever the actual sequence of events, Wellford's comments on the selection and the procedures of the 2,4,5-T committee bear attention: "The members were selected by USDA from a list of candidates prepared by the National Academy of Sciences. The members were screened for financial interests but the question of environmental or chemical industry biases never came up. As it turned out all the members except Dr. Thomas Sterling, who wrote a scathing dissent, tended to come from one side of the philosophical divide. . . . Moreover the list of witnesses who appeared before the committee is composed almost entirely of administrators, not active scientists. The committee chairman also declined to hear evidence from environmentalists. . . ."

Carroll said all future committee reports to EPA, as well as minority reports such as Sterling's, will promptly be made public. But Wellford claimed Sterling's membership on the 2,4,5-T panel was an accidental oversight by USDA officials. Nader and Metcalf would avoid such arguments over what happens in private by requiring public meetings of advisory committees and public representation on them.

Nader, in his testimony, made it clear he believes NAS should be subject to some such constraints, too. He described the Academy as a quasi-governmental body which exists in an accountability vacuum—without procedures for checking on "dual allegiances or conflict of interest" of committee members.

## Tracing the breakdown of immunity in cancer

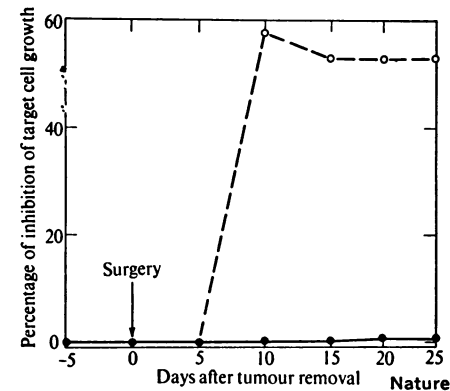
While many researchers are pursuing cancer-causing agents like viruses, others are trying to track down how the body defends itself against them. Experiments on the latter tack, and a proposed explanation for immune breakdown in cancer based on the work, are reported in the Oct. 1 NATURE by Kathleen R. Ambrose and two colleagues at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

There are few scientists today who believe that cancer is not in some way linked with a failure in immune defense. The explanation by Ambrose et al. may eventually provide a basis for an early warning system for human cancers which are still latent, and for assessing the success of cancer therapy.

The Oak Ridge biologists' first move was to prove that humoral antibodies, those that circulate in the blood, can retard or prevent proliferation of tumor cells in hamsters independently of the action of lymphocytes, scavenger white blood cells. Lymphocytes generally serve as a defense against infectious microorganisms and other foreign antigenic materials, and some scientists believe they play a role in warding off cancer.

With further experiments, the three—Ambrose, Norman Anderson and J. H. Coggin Jr.—established certain facts about the cancer-holding antibodies. They seem to be produced before tumors appear. They retard tumor growth. They are always present in immune animals. And when tumors are removed by surgery, the antibodies reappear, at least in some animals.

On the basis of this evidence, Ambrose and her colleagues thus propose how immune breakdown may trigger or at least encourage cancer growth. Usually after tissue is exposed to a carcinogen, say a virus, a small tumor mass is established in the tissue and may grow for a few hours without restriction. But as the blood sends fighting antibodies to this tissue, tumor



Antibody appearance after surgery.