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OF THE WEEK

ICSU for scientific freedom	259
Nobel Prizes 1976	
Physics	260
Medicine	260
Chemistry	261
Viking's perplexing data	261
Soviets abort space mission	262
PCST members named	262
Ban on porpoise killing	262
Quake prediction council	262
FDA: No more aerosols	262
Kirlian effects	263
Huntington's: Animal model	263

ARTICLES

Peterson: New Directions	267
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RESEARCH NOTES

Biology	269
Natural Sciences	269

DEPARTMENTS

Books	268
Off the beat: Talking teravolts	269
Stars	270

COVER: Chemist, elected politician, bureaucrat, now lobbyist, Russell W. Peterson has emerged as one of the country's leading spokesmen for long-range, holistic planning in matters of the environment, energy and conservation. He shares his views on these subjects in an interview with SCIENCE NEWS. See p. 267. (Montage: Council on Environmental Quality. Peterson photo: Michelle Galler Riegel)

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SCIENCE NEWS OF THE WEEK

ICSU: Guidelines on DNA and Freedom

An international committee was formed this week to "blow the whistle" on any countries that do not comply with prevailing safety standards for research on recombinant DNA (SN: 12/13/75, p. 372).

The Committee on Genetic Experimentation (COGENE) of the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) has several objectives. It will monitor governmental actions and encourage governments to set up uniform policies regulating recombinant DNA research. It will also provide the public with information about the benefits and hazards of genetic research and report on ethical and legal issues this research raises.

Another aim of COGENE is to assist scientists in pursuing research on recombinant DNA as safely as possible. The committee plans to give information on sources of technical advice, provide training programs and perhaps support centralized laboratories that scientists can visit to do hazardous experiments.

The council does not believe that research on recombinant DNA should be prohibited, according to W. J. Whelan, chairman of the ad hoc committee on recombinant DNA molecules. "The committee is interested in seeing research go ahead, but responsibly," Whelan said.

COGENE will make no attempt to directly regulate research. "The only force we have is moral persuasion," said Philip Handler, head of the U.S. delegation to ICSU and president of the National Academy of Sciences.

The ICSU is an international organization representing national academies of sciences, research councils and international scientific specialty unions. It works to promote international cooperation on such global scientific projects as exploration of the oceans and environmental monitoring. It has also taken an active role in promoting freedom of movement for scientists who might otherwise have been denied visas or exit permits when they applied to attend scientific meetings or change their citizenship.

At the 16th ICSU General Assembly held in Washington last week—its first meeting in the United States in 18 years—the encroachment of politics on science was again high on the agenda. For years the council and its constituent unions have been urging the participation of the People's Republic of China. But when the Chinese finally decided to join the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), the union admitted them only after expelling Taiwanese representatives. The council is thus caught in the bind of trying to affirm its principle of admitting all nations, while avoiding the pitfalls of defining who has the right to represent a nation.

The final compromise might at first seem purely a matter of semantics. The assembly resolved that ICSU membership would be open to "any community of scientists which effectively represent the scientific activity in a definite territory." Thus Taiwanese scientists would be welcome so long as they claimed only to represent the scientific activity actually taking place on the island of Taiwan. Their government's position on political claims to the mainland would thus, it was hoped, be bypassed.

To drive home the point, the assembly further resolved that any such group would be listed under "a name that will avoid any misunderstanding about the territory represented," and urged IUGS to thus readmit "the community of geologists in Taiwan." In fact, the IUGS council will not meet for another four years, but its representatives to the Washington meeting did not raise any objection. The resolutions are seen mainly as a means of forestalling similar action by other unions.

Another semantic change may also signify a new ICSU willingness to take a more aggressive stand against suppression of scientific research, in whatever form it may take. On the face of it, the change involves renaming the "Committee on Migration" as the "Committee on the Safeguard of the Pursuit of Science." But, as explained by outgoing ICSU president Harrison Brown, the renamed committee will no longer restrict itself to pressuring countries to allow their scientists to emigrate, but will also consider cases in which a scientist has been fired or forbidden to publish.

Again, ICSU would have no real power to enforce antidiscrimination, but formal protests, based on carefully constructed dossiers, backed by the world's most widely representative nongovernmental scientific organization, have already had their impact in other areas. For example, when Japan had refused to admit representatives from South Africa to a meeting, Brown's protest as head of ICSU was able to bring about a full reversal of policy. Such problems of circulation are "just about at their lowest number ever," he says, and they are "diminishing because of efforts we have been making."

Sixty-six nations (or territorial communities of scholars, or whatever) are now ICSU members, as well as 17 international disciplinary unions. Nominally, some 700,000 scientists are thus represented, and some 50,000 to 100,000 scientists actually come together each year in conjunction with some ICSU-sponsored activity. □