

mans as well as in mice.

Comments arthritis expert James Klinenberg of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, "We have simplistically said the proliferating [synovial cells] come from an inflammatory stimulus." But a cause-and-effect relationship has never been proved, he notes. The UAB work "is reasonable and exciting — something to speculate about."

If the problem does prove to be proliferating synovial cells, "It could point the

way to the development of agents to interrupt the process," says Koopman. But it also raises a key question: If inflammation doesn't kick off the cell proliferation, what does?

Researchers from the Scripps Clinic and Research Foundation in La Jolla, Calif., suggest that one cause may be Epstein-Barr virus, which may stimulate the immune system into marshaling an attack against the body's cartilage and joints.

—J. Silberner

A fresh start at Three Mile Island?

After almost six years of hearings, investigations and legal disputes, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) last week voted 4-1 in favor of allowing the undamaged unit (TMI-1) of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant to begin operating again as soon as June 11. TMI-1 has been shut down since a catastrophic accident struck its nearby twin, TMI-2, in March 1979.

The decision, however, was immediately challenged when the state of Pennsylvania and Three Mile Island Alert, a Harrisburg-based citizens' group, filed separate petitions with the federal appeals court in Philadelphia. Both petitions contend that NRC did not have enough information to make a proper decision and that further hearings are necessary. The chief doubts center on whether General Public Utilities Corp. (GPU) has the "character and integrity" to operate a nuclear power plant safely.

Says Pennsylvania Governor Richard Thornburgh, "Until we can be assured that the plant can be safely and competently operated, no action to open the plant should be taken."

"GPU is not fit to hold a license to operate TMI-1," insists Elyn R. Weiss, general counsel for the Union of Concerned Scientists, based in Washington, D.C. She points to evidence of reactor operators who cheated on their qualifying exams, allegedly false testimony from GPU officials at congressional hearings, harassment of workers involved in the TMI-2 cleanup, and the conviction of Metropolitan Edison Co. (the GPU subsidiary that originally operated TMI) for falsifying leak-rate data.

GPU officials say that TMI's new operator, another subsidiary called GPU Nuclear, "is ready and able to operate TMI-1 safely." Says GPU Chairman William G. Kuhns, "It has not been a quick fix, rather a deliberate, thoughtful program of developing what we want to be the finest nuclear operation in the country."

NRC's General Counsel Herzel Plaine, in his report to NRC, agrees that management faults have been corrected. GPU Nuclear "represents a significantly improved organization over Metropolitan Edison Co.," he says. But critics say

that GPU has merely shuffled individuals around.

Moreover, the path NRC followed to come to a decision is itself controversial. "The NRC's administrative process on the restart of TMI-1 has often appeared tangled and confused with partial initial decisions leading to appeals, resulting in reopened and remanded hearings at every turn," says Rep. Don Ritter (R-Pa.).

At the time of the TMI-2 accident, TMI-1 had been shut down for routine refueling. That summer, NRC issued two orders that kept TMI-1 closed and specified which issues had to be resolved before the plant could restart. Most of the work fell to NRC's Atomic Safety and Licensing Board, which looked at the problems one by one and issued "partial initial decisions" as each problem was cleared up to its satisfaction.

Last February, a majority of NRC's five commissioners decided that all of the major issues had been settled and that no further hearings were necessary. But two commissioners were sharply critical of that decision.

Commissioner James K. Asselstine, who voted against the restart order, argues that the NRC either ignored or discounted important issues. "The Commission's decision-making process and its refusal to allow further hearings has not promoted public confidence," says Asselstine.

Commissioner Frederick M. Bernthal also criticizes what he calls NRC's "unwise and ill-considered path," although he voted in favor of restart on technical grounds. "I suspect that only the lawyers may delight in the decision," he says, "because their future is assured."

And many residents of Dauphin County, where TMI is located, are worried. "Doesn't the NRC understand that keeping TMI closed is the only way we can gain the peace of mind that we lost over six years ago?" asks County Commissioner Larry Hochendoner.

Nevertheless, unless the federal court delays implementation of NRC's restart order and if two NRC-imposed conditions are met, at noon on June 11, TMI-1 operators will have the authority to start producing power again. —I. Peterson

Court blocks Army testing laboratory

A U.S. district court has enjoined the Army from continuing the construction of a proposed aerosol toxin laboratory at the Dugway Proving Ground in Utah. The court ruled that the Army has not adequately considered and disclosed the potential environmental impact of the facility.

The suit was brought by the Foundation on Economic Trends, a Washington, D.C.-based public-interest organization, and two retired military officers (SN: 12/22 & 29/84, p. 397). The foundation, led by Jeremy Rifkin, has also won cases blocking the deliberate release of genetically engineered microorganisms and requiring the National Institutes of Health to prepare an environmental assessment of such experiments (SN: 3/9/85, p. 148).

The Dugway Proving Ground, located 87 miles southwest of Salt Lake City, is a Defense Department installation to assess the "military value of chemical warfare and biological defense systems," according to the defendants. Congress approved funds in 1984 for a modernization, which would include construction of an aerosol toxin laboratory. The Army says the laboratory was designed to meet the most stringent safety regulations for work with genetically engineered organisms, in case the Army decided to test such organisms at some future date.

The plaintiffs argued that the Army should be required to prepare a formal environmental impact statement on the grounds that the laboratory would likely be used for work with recombinant DNA organisms. Judge Joyce Hens Green decided that these grounds were not the most important aspect of this case, but that the quality of the environmental assessment was. She points out that pathogenic agents and toxins will be used in the proposed facility, even if genetically engineered organisms are not. "Indeed," she says in her written opinion, "the attention riveted on [the genetic engineering] issue has to some extent masked a more important one. . . . a proposed federal action — regardless of whether it involves new or different technology — must be accompanied by an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment that comports with applicable standards of judicial review."

Green agrees with the plaintiffs that the assessment published by the Army is "clearly inadequate. . . . [It] represents but an amalgam of conclusory statements and unsupported assertions of 'no impact.'" Finally Green weighed defense concerns in her decision, and concluded, "With the mighty power and resources of our government, the defendants . . . can determine the urgency of the situation and move accordingly." —J.A. Miller