Biohazard research committee named

By Mike McNamee

A voluntary faculty and staff committee to deal with biohazardous agents used in MIT research has been established, the administration announced this week.

Professor of Biology Maurice Fox has been named to chair the seven-member Committee on Assessment of Biohazards, which will review use of infectious organisms in research and will propose guidelines and standards for control of such agents.

Fox chaired an ad hoc group which wrote a proposal last month suggesting that a faculty group on biohazardous agents which causes tumors could be expanded, including the guidelines for research with recombinant DNA which a committee of the National Institutes recently completed. Those guidelines, which will replace an earlier voluntary moratorium on DNA-modification experiments, will be presented at an American scientific conference in mid-February, according to an NIH spokesperson.

However, the committee will probably not become involved in a potentially "political" problem, such as whether research with recombinant DNA should be allowed at all or who should control such work. Fox told The Tech in an interview last month that he was reluctant to "get dragged into questions" on whether research with biohazardous agents and reviewing the facilities and methods proposed for use and control of them.

-- Developing a list of research projects involving biohazardous agents and reviewing the facilities and methods proposed for use and control of them.

-- Collecting up-to-date information on biohazardous agents, and keeping researchers informed of the latest methods of use and control.

-- Keeping track of research involving biohazardous agents and reviewing the facilities and methods proposed for use and control of them.

-- Making sure that all research involving biohazardous agents is being reported to the committee, and if any, the committee will receive.

The committee will be responsible for enforcement of any federal regulations on biohazardous agents which are handed down, including the guidelines for research with recombinant DNA which a committee of the National Institutes recently completed. Those guidelines, which will replace an earlier voluntary moratorium on DNA-modification experiments, will be presented at a special scientific conference in mid-February, according to an NIH spokesperson.

However, the committee will probably not become involved in a potentially "political" problem, such as whether research with recombinant DNA should be allowed at all or who should control such work. Fox told The Tech in an interview last month that he was reluctant to "get dragged into questions" on whether research with biohazardous agents and reviewing the facilities and methods proposed for use and control of them.

The Corporation Visiting Committee for Student Affairs will conduct open meetings next Friday and Saturday, Jan. 23 and 24. Seven sessions will be held to discuss a number of student-affairs issues.

8am Friday, McCormick Brown Room -- Discussion of the Office of Minority Education and Student Governance. Open. 12:30pm, McCormick -- Discussion of Athletics. Open.

4:30pm, McCormick -- Discussion of Student Housing. Open.

8pm, Student Center Magazine Lounge -- Open discussion of Dean for Student Affairs Office. Open.

11am Saturday, Student Center West Lounge -- Discussion of Talbot House, Freshman Advisory Council, and Housing, followed by Summary. Open.

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Conservation concerns over use of Social Security numbers (SSNs) as all-purpose nationwide identifiers has led MIT administration officials to question whether the Institute should continue to use SSNs for student ID numbers.

There's no federal mandate forbidding MIT or any other institution from using SSNs as "key numbers," identifiers that allow different administrative computer systems to "talk" to each other.

But concern for privacy of records has been in the news in the last year, especially at schools affected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, which opened student records for review and challenge. And so MIT's Office of Administrative Information Systems, in the middle of a long-term upgrading of MIT's administrative computer systems, deemed it might be wise to get an opinion on whether those systems should be planned with SSN-IDs or some other ID system in mind.

Legally, OAIS said, there was no problem. MIT could not require a student to give his SSN, but there was no law forbidding SSN-use on IDs.

But Professor of Electrical Engineering Arthur C. Smith, head of MIT's new Committee on Privacy, said that that assessment could change any time now.

"With the way things are going, it may be illegal in a couple of years to use Social Security numbers," Smith explained. "MIT has never had security problems with its internal administrative systems, so we're not really concerned, with records being breached.

The full Privacy Committee is expected to discuss the pros and cons within the next few weeks, weighing the mechanical disadvantages of changing to a new system against the privacy benefits to be gained.

Smith wouldn't predict what the committee would do, but Paul Sals, OAIS systems development manager, offered a prediction: "It looks to me like we won't be using SSNs."

If so, MIT will have taken a big step forward in protection of personal records. Some students and administrators, however, would go even farther to stop widespread use of SSNs by MIT. Special Assistant to the Provost Louis Menard pointed out, for example, that MIT requires more than 4,000 applicants annually to submit their SSNs.

"What high school senior is going to refuse and tell MIT it can't have his Social Security number?" Menard asked. "And what possible use can MIT have for the number of someone who isn't even admitted?"