of litigation between himself and the agency, a fact which Mr Auchter initially used as a reason for not providing detailed comments on the case to the investigations committee. However, under pressure from the Congressmen, who presented legal advice that the hearings would not prejudice any later trial, Mr Auchter shifted his stance — and went on to deny that he had ordered Dr Infante's dismissal, directly contradicting the sworn testimony given by Dr Walker.

Dr Walker, who told the subcommittee members that "the data suggested that formaldehyde was a potential carcinogen and should be treated as such", has now resigned from OSHA to take up the position of director of public health for the State of Michigan.

The subcommittee has yet to announce the conclusions of its investigations. Indeed one minority member, Republican Congressman Robert Walker, sharply defended OSHA's actions on the grounds that Dr Infante had broken federal rules in representing his own scientific opinion as that of the agency. Mr Gore, however, was in no doubt "that the formaldehyde industry had "engineered a decision in the agency to change OSHA's view on the scientific data" and that this was behind the decision to fire Dr Infante.

David Dickson

Local DNA guidelines

Boston strikes out

Boston

In what could become a prototype for American cities seeking control of recombinant DNA research, the Boston City Council has passed a law regulating research at universities and commercial companies. The city ordinance follows community activism by residents of the Mission Hill district of Boston, who are concerned about the $50 million grant by the Hoechst chemical company to the Massachusetts General Hospital and by the leasing of empty hospital space in their neighbourhood to Genetics Institute Inc., the newly formed genetic engineering company.

The city council hearings of the past month have actually been a repeat of events in nearby Cambridge eight years ago, when recombinant DNA research was entirely new. But on this occasion, there was less open conflict between citizens and university officials than in Cambridge.

The new law requires compliance with National Institutes of Health (NIH) standards but there are also further local restrictions which have been added since work began on the original proposal in late May. As well as assuring strict conformity with NIH guidelines, the ordinance demands:

- "Timely response to guideline amendment and permit applications in accordance with good governmental practice".
- Research proposal not subject to NIH guidelines should receive council-administered permits.
- Broadening and restructuring of the Boston Biohazards Committee — an area regulatory organization — which will now serve as an advisory board to the commissioner of the Boston Department of Health and provide an annual report to the city council.
- Opening of normally confidential employee health records for "regulatory or public health study purposes".
- Institutions performing recombinant DNA research should monitor the health of their employees and the institutional responsibilities in this area should be "reasonable and related to potential risks".
- Costs of monitoring to be reimbursed to the city by the regulated institutions.

The final version of the ordinance left out the harshest requirement of the original proposal — that institutions should perform regular effluent monitoring and the testing for live organisms in the city sewer system. This was dropped because it is not technologically feasible.

In the past, local universities have agreed that guidelines of some sort would be helpful but have opposed the introduction of laws requiring compliance with official regulations, arguing that universities should set their own standards. But campus officials are generally pleased with the outcome of this debate and confident that they will easily meet the provisions.

The new ordinance will run for five years and is renewable. Several other cities in the Boston area and elsewhere in the United States have begun to review their own proposals for regulation as commercial companies are proliferating.

Michael D. Stein

Aspartame sugar substitute

New court overruled

Washington

It had been described as the first official attempt to resolve a complicated dispute over the safety of a new food additive by using a so-called "science court", with evidence on both sides being presented to a panel of three outside scientists. But last Wednesday the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) overruled the verdict of its Scientific Public Board of Inquiry, reached after hearings held in January and February last year, and approved the marketing of a new low-calorie sweetener, aspartame.

Permission to market the sweetener had first been requested from FDA by its manufacturers, G.D. Searle, seven years ago. Initially FDA had agreed; but in the light of reports from a scientist at Washington University, St Louis, that the sweetener could produce brain lesions when fed to laboratory animals — and the general concern that accompanied the decision to ban cyclamates in 1970 — permission was withdrawn the following year pending further studies.

Doubts about the validity of animal studies conducted for Searle to generate the data needed for new drug approval were discounted after two years of independent auditing of the studies. FDA then turned to the brain lesion claims, which were examined by a three-person team headed by Dr Walle J.H. Nauta, professor of neuroanatomy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In their report, issued last October, the scientists said the data shown to them did not support the suggestions that aspartame might kill clusters of brain cells or cause other types of brain damage.

However, the "science court" also raised doubts about whether the reports of brain lesions could be completely discounted on the grounds that the tests had been carried out at doses far higher than those humans would normally experience. It recommended that marketing approval be withheld until further long-term animal tests had been carried out to rule out any possibility that aspartame could result in brain damage.

This conclusion was bitterly contested by Searle, already sitting on a stockpile of 300,000 lb of the sweetener, with a market value of over $25 million. The company claimed that the three scientists' conclusions made "significant errors" in dealing with issues of tumorigenicity; and that they had "failed to employ biological and statistical principles that would have provided guidance in assessing the potential carcinogencity of a compound".

Searle pointed out that the sweetener is already being marketed in France, Belgium and Luxembourg, and that it has also been approved for use by the Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives of the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Health Organization.

The new FDA commissioner, Dr Arthur Hayes, now seems to have accepted Searle's arguments. Following the conclusion of the agency's Bureau of Foods that the "science court's" concerns were unfounded and that the sweetener would be safe even at the "highest conceivable levels" of consumption, he has agreed that it should be approved for use as a sugar-substitute and food additive, although not yet for soft drinks.

David Dickson

Environmental lead

Playing safe

Britain's health and environment departments seem to have won a victory behind the scenes in the government's decision last month to reduce the lead content of petrol from 0.4 to 0.15 g per litre. Other government departments concerned about the financial effects on the car and oil refining industries finally gave

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