

Any enthusiasm or hope among the audience for instant legislation was properly damped by Mr Ernest Marples in his opening address and Lord Halsbury in his after dinner speech. They firmly stressed the need for careful appraisal, and a clear understanding of what is required and the pitfalls to be encountered before a bill becomes law.

MEDICINAL RESEARCH

Safety First

THE Beecham Group's growing interest in pharmaceuticals other than antibiotics has found a new home in a Medicinal Research Centre at Harlow, officially opened on November 11 by Professor Sir Charles Dodds. By his account, the group's research will in future include the development of psychiatric aids such as mood modifiers and memory stimulants, a search for more effective treatments of arthritis and rheumatism and further investigations in the anti-fertility field. Much emphasis at the opening, however, was laid on the precautions taken against possible toxic side effects which may appear from new drugs.

Harlow is taking over and expanding an aspect of the Beecham Group's activities that was always overshadowed at the Brockham Park laboratory in Surrey by the success of the penicillins. More than a third of the staff of 150 has moved from Brockham Park. The new centre is clearly a materialization of the hints about diversifying that Sir Ronald Edwards, chairman of the Beecham Group, revealed to the annual shareholders' meeting last July (see *Nature*, 223, 440; 1969).

Prospects for the centre's work in the microbiological aspects of arthritis are exciting, according to Dr H. R. J. Waddington, senior scientist. There is also much scope for new ideas in geriatrics, especially in dealing with the mental difficulties of aged patients: improving mood and reviving memory are two aspects that may become a widespread function of drugs in the near future, and the Beecham laboratories expect to be among the leaders in bringing out suitable new compounds.

All potentially marketable drugs will go through a number of safety tests which involve looking for effects on the constitution of the blood, the function of the cardiovascular and respiratory systems, the structure of tissues in treated organs, and all stages of the reproductive cycle, as well as investigations of drug metabolism. The possibility of foetal malformation



The Beecham Group's research centre at Harlow.

receives particular attention. The pharmaceuticals industry has obviously had to reconsider its screening procedures to prevent anything like the thalidomide tragedy happening again: one result is a change in the attitude of the scientists that might even give the impression to a casual visitor that the science of teratology began with thalidomide.

The organization of work at Harlow is flexible, with an interdisciplinary approach to the problems of chemistry, biology and medicine that have to be solved. Although it is up to the chemists actually to make the potential drugs, ideas are welcomed from all sources—even, it seems, from witch doctors, who occasionally come up with remedies that industry can usefully borrow. A notice on one laboratory door proclaims that "green coconut milk is taken in the Pacific Islands as a contraceptive", but it is not yet thought that the Palm endangers the future of the Pill.

CANCER

Research as a Charity

THE Marie Curie Memorial Foundation is expanding its research into cancer but is spending more than its income. This was the principal message to emerge from the foundation's annual general meeting in London on November 12, when the treasurer, Lord Amherst, announced a deficit of £71,766 for the twenty-first year of activities. The ignorance among the public of how often cancer can be prevented or successfully treated was emphasized at the meeting, and the chairman, Mr Ronald W. Raven, put in a plea for "the total abolition of tobacco".

The aims of the foundation, which calls itself "the only comprehensive cancer service in the world", include providing residential homes for cancer patients and help for patients staying at home, an educational and advisory service through a series of booklets, and a research department. It is an entirely voluntary organization, and donations this year were lower by £25,000 than in 1968. The foundation's assets amount to £884,389, however, and there are hopes of breaking even next year.

About twenty-five people are employed by the research department, which has just moved into newly acquired buildings at Limsfield in Surrey. Present projects fall into four groups: the interaction between steroid hormones and nucleic acids, the metabolism of steroids within the cell, a study of tumour invasion and the anti-metabolic treatment of leukaemia. There is plenty of room at Limsfield for further expansion, but this will depend on the availability of money. One possibility is an epidemiological unit to look at statistical problems in the incidence of cancer, and the extension of work on steroid chemistry. Applications for jobs in the research department greatly outnumber the opportunities.

The guest speaker at the meeting, Dr John Dunwoody, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Health), stressed health education as one of the foundation's most valuable services and blamed the public for not responding to the government's anti-smoking and cervical screening campaigns. Dr Dunwoody did not, however, take up the bait offered by Mr Raven, who claimed that if people continued to smoke "it would be right and proper for a higher authority to take the action required".