

Miscellaneous Intelligence

"GENETIC 'BOMB' FEARS GROW" whispered the *Evening Standard* in its midday editions of November 24. The appeal of the front page headline was later widened by transmogrification to "NAKED GENE—SCIENTISTS SPLIT". The *Daily Mail* was less colourful with "THE FRIGHTENING FACT OF LIFE" emblazoned across its front page, to which the legend ran, "Scientists find secret of human heredity—and it scares them". The story beneath these banners turned out to have been scooped by *Nature* two days earlier, but *Nature's* front page headline merely said "ISOLATION OF PURE *LAC* OPERON". Why so dull? Why did *Nature* not trumpet louder? Readers who may have read with interest the accounts of the press conference given by Dr Jon Beckwith and his colleagues but searched through their *Nature* article in vain for references to the genetic bomb and its ilk are assured that the manuscript was published as received from the authors.

THE Swann committee, in the course of its study of how antibiotics are used on farms, has discovered that the human population of the British Isles weighs an aggregate of 3,310,000 metric tons. For the glory of the drug industry and the greater glory of the medical profession, this body politic is dosed with some 240 tons of antibiotics a year. The Swann committee was not asked to determine whether doctors are over-prescribing antibiotics but, as mute witnesses go, 240 tons is a clarion voice that doctors need vetting.

A RECENT article in that learned journal the *New England Journal of Medicine* contained an electrocardiogram tracing which was interpreted from its intricate notches and zigzags to show that the patient was suffering from retrograde atrial conduction. A correspondent has pointed out (*New England Journal of Medicine*, 281, 1132; 1969) that the ingenious interpretation is marred only by the fact that the tracing is printed upside down.

MORTALS in Sheffield will die easier in the knowledge that their medical officer of health is looking for an apparatus to register death. An electroencephalograph, perhaps, or even a simple cardiograph. Heart transplant surgeons will be interested in his choice. His problem is that in the last five years "between one and five" corpses have taken fright at the slabs in the Sheffield mortuary and flickered back to life.

THE news sense of the US Atomic Energy Commission has been in strange abeyance of late. A press release on the fire that broke out at the AEC's Rocky Flats plant near Boulder, Colorado, in May this year gives the impression of almost deliberately trying to conceal, by burying away on page three of a densely technical report, the not wholly insignificant fact that the damage caused by the fire is estimated as at least \$45,000,000.

PLANS to bridge the Straits of Messina are even more popular than those to span the English Channel. A group, chaired by Professor Ernesto Manuelli, president of Finsider, has declared that a three span bridge would be technically possible and economically auspicious for Sicily and her tourist trade.

Parliament in Britain

Hovercraft

GOVERNMENT investment in the hovercraft industry has been about £10 million and is now running at about £3 million a year. Over the past two years, the industry has received orders worth more than £32 million, of which £9 million has been in exports. These facts emerged from a lengthy question to Lord Delacourt-Smith, Minister of State, Ministry of Technology, from the Earl of Kinnoull, and both agreed that the industry is in a much healthier state than many people imagine. Lord Delacourt-Smith indicated that the government is supporting the hovercraft industry in three ways: by providing assistance for basic research in hovercraft technology being carried out at the National Physical Laboratory, by placing research and development contracts with private industry for the development of major components, and by providing financial support to hovercraft manufacturers. The present research and development programme includes considerable interest in high speed ground transport. Two experimental vehicles and three miles of electrified test track are being built near Cambridge, and trials and evaluations will be conducted up to spring 1971. Lord Delacourt-Smith said, however, that it is too early to decide how the further development and operation of hovertrains will be organized. Design, construction, maintenance and safety requirements are at present vetted by the Air Registration Board (ARB), and this function may later be transferred to an independent Hovercraft Authority. The President of the Board of Trade, he said, will probably appoint a committee, on which the ARB and Lloyd's Register of Shipping would be represented, to make recommendations about the constitution, terms of reference and financing of such an authority. (Oral answers, Lords, November 18.)

European Cooperation

THE government's attitude to European cooperation in space technology has not changed. Mr Anthony Wedgwood-Benn said that it still supported a single European Space Organization, and that the UK would be participating fully to this end in the work of the Committee of Senior Officials. He also said that the government believed that voting in the Intelsat Assembly, the body which will exercise general oversight of the Intelsat organization, should be on the basis of one nation one vote, and that the commercial policy of the organization should be determined by the board of governors, whose voting rights would be related to investment shares. (Written answers, November 17.)

Experiments on Animals

BARONESS LLEWELYN-DAVIES OF HASTOE said that she did not know when the government would be able to introduce legislation to implement the recommendations of the Littlewood Committee on experiments on live animals, which were made in 1965. She said that this is a very complex matter, and that it is better to proceed slowly and arrive at the correct legislation. Lord Brooke of Cumnor thought, however, that the government's delay in implementing the recommendations of the Littlewood Committee is rapidly becoming a scandal. (Oral answers, Lords, November 20.)