

Scandal over Nazi victims' corpses rocks universities

- Television programme opens old wounds
- New mood among medical students

Munich

ISRAEL last week protested to the West German government after a television company broadcast claims that tissue samples and skeletons from the corpses of victims of Nazi-era executions are being used for teaching purposes at West German medical schools.

The Israeli Religion Minister demanded that West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl immediately deliver all body parts from Nazi victims for a proper burial, although it has not been established that Jewish victims are involved. Kohl in turn has called on the universities to stop using any such remains and added that these practices "should have ended forty years ago". The medical schools at Tübingen and Heidelberg are at the centre of the row. Both are looking into the allegations although it is not expected that the charges will be conclusively proved in more than a few cases.

The allegations provoked a storm in West Germany when broadcast on the ARD television network. Although it is well known that, during the Nazi era, corpses for medical education were procured by universities from nearby execution sites, nobody seems to have asked about the origins of the slides and skeletons now being used in anatomy classes.

The practice of using the corpses of executed criminals began before the Nazis gained power, but the number of executions rose dramatically after 1933. The anatomy institute at Tübingen alone received 1,077 bodies from the execution

site in Stuttgart between 1933 and 1945.

Tübingen University officials said they "had been lulled into a false sense of security" and believed that all remaining body parts from Nazi victims had been disposed of just after the war in a dignified manner. Both Tübingen and Heidelberg promptly began investigations but spokesmen for both universities pointed out that it will be virtually impossible to determine the origins of organs or individual bones in their medical collections.

Officials at Tübingen found four slides that had been prepared from two corpses of Nazi victims who were executed for political reasons. One was a woman of Polish extraction, the other a man presumed to be a German. In Heidelberg, three slides (out of about 1,500 in the collection) were found dating back to 1941 and 1943. The names of the people from whose corpses they were taken were not listed on the slides, but the indication 'decapitatus' indicates that the people may have been victims of Nazi persecution. A skull was also found that had been preserved by the 'preparator' of skeletons employed in the anatomy department from 1937 to 1946. All four items were removed from the department's collection and will be cremated.

That the row has erupted now may be indicative of changing attitudes. The current generation of medical students is demanding a deeper evaluation of the Nazi legacy in West German medicine. One result may be further scandals to come.

Steven Dickman

Breaking ranks

THE pay dispute between academics and management in Britain's universities took a surprise turn last week when the head of one university made a pay and promotions offer to staff in an attempt to avert industrial action which is disrupting university examinations throughout the country.

The principal of the University of St Andrews, Professor Struther Arnott, offered all academic and related staff a pay increase of 5 per cent from January to March this year and from April to March 1990 conditional on any new national pay scales negotiated. He also offered to make 30 promotions over the next three years, at least 20 to the level of senior lecturer. The offer must be sanctioned by the university's governing body, next month.

The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) was surprised by the move and fears that it may jeopardize the universities' negotiations with the government for extra money to finance salary increases for 1989-90. The Association of University Teachers will not accept the offer, arguing that a local solution will not solve a national problem. But it hopes the move will put pressure on the CVCP to speed up national negotiations. C.McG.

LA cools it

BIOTECHNOLOGY gadfly Jeremy Rifkin has turned his attention to global warming, with the result that before too long there should be pockets of green dotting the asphalt landscape of Los Angeles. Last week, Rifkin joined Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley at a press conference at which Bradley announced that the city would plant 2-5 million trees to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and break up "heat islands" that raise the local temperature.

The tree-planting exercise is an initiative of Rifkin's Global Greenhouse Network, a group made up of international public interest groups and legislators. Rifkin expects Los Angeles to be the first of a number of cities around the world to adopt the tree-planting scheme. J.P.

Czech explosives

THE Czechoslovak government, evidently embarrassed by reports that its explosive "Semtex" was responsible for the destruction of the Pan-American aircraft over Scotland last month, last week proposed an international convention on the certification and detection of explosives. The offer, made during last week's conference in Paris (see page 199), immediately preceded the visit to Britain of a Czechoslovak team to assist in the forensic investigation of the disaster. The proposed convention is intended to regulate the manufacture of explosives for legitimate purposes and would include guidelines for their detection and the prevention of their unauthorized disclosure. V.R.

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REASONS

Associated Press

Work continues at Dumont d'Urville in Antarctica (see last week's Nature), where France is constructing a new airstrip. Greenpeace protestors are still occupying the southern end of the airstrip.