U.K. FACILITIES

AMERICAN DRUG FIRMS TRIM BRITISH PLANTS

LONDON—A.H. Robins is selling its U.K. manufacturing plant, completed less than two years ago at a cost of £9 million, to the British company Glaxo. Although the U.S. pharmaceuticals group is under pressure from lawsuits concerning its intrauterine contraceptive (the Dalkon Shield), the move is one further indication that many American drug companies are finding Britain a less congenial location for their operations. Ironically, the causes are government actions, considered by the Labour party when last in power, which have actually come to fruition under the Thatcher administration.

Most important is the introduction of a limited list of drugs which can be prescribed under the National Health Service (NHS). Among the many banned products are certain vitamin pills, cough medicines, and other preparations which comprised some £4 million of Robins' £12.5 million U.K. sales last year. Another irritation has been the government's decision to limit the amount of money that can be spent on the promotion of pharmaceuticals. This move, which has already led to the demise of several medical periodicals dependent on advertising revenue, is seen by the drug companies as an unwarranted and arbitrary interference.

In addition to A.H. Robins, several other U.S. firms have been reviewing their U.K. operations in the light of these changes. Pfizer says that it has cancelled new ventures worth £5–20 million. Wyeth Laboratories has certainly cut production at several centers because its tranquilizers can now be prescribed under the NHS only as generics. Warner Lambert has closed one factory at which a highly popular but black-listed cough syrup was manufactured. And Eli Lilly has told the government that it will be reducing its R&D investment here and is considering Ireland as the base for a major new biotechnology project.

On the other hand, government aid to attract industry towards comparatively deprived regions in the U.K. continues to tempt overseas companies to set up operations here—one example being Damon Biotech's £30 million biotechnology plant in Scotland. **—Bernard Dixon**

RESEARCH FUNDING

BIOTRANS PLANS BIOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

LONDON—The U.K. Department of Trade and Industry has provided a £1 million grant to help launch BIOTRANS, a unique association between the Laboratory of the Government Chemist (LGC) in London and the University of Kent (Canterbury), which will focus on biological transformations. Originally established to provide analytical services for government departments and public bodies, the LGC now makes its expertise available to industry too.

BIOTRANS will embrace feasibility studies, R&D contracts and joint programs, and small-scale enzyme preparation. The work will be carried out at both at the LGC (which set up a Biotechnology Research Group in 1982) and the Biological Laboratory at Canterbury. Chris Knowles, professor of microbial biochemistry, will head the university team.

For the University of Kent, the launch of BIOTRANS represents the second of two recent developments that have advanced its reputation considerably as one of the most aggressive forces behind British biotechnology. Against stiff competition, the Kent Research and Development Centre also attracted the new Porton International subsidiary, LH Bioprocessing (LHB), to its complex now being constructed alongside the university's main science laboratories.

"We chose Kent because we felt that it offered an ideal professional and working environment," says Derek Layton, group managing director of Porton International. "Particularly important was the university's commitment to rapidly developing areas of high technology and its flair and flexible approach in treating collaborative ventures with industry."

In association with other members of the Porton International group, LHB's services cover the discovery, design, and optimization of bioprocesses; production capability; and the design and provision of process plants. Directors of the company include Alan Bull, the professor of microbial technology at Kent, and Geoffrey Holt, who moved to Canterbury recently from London to become the industrial professor of genetics. **—BD**

FUNGAL GENETICS

HARNESSING WHITE ROT FUNGUS TO METHYLATE CHLORIDE IONS

LONDON—Halocarbon production by *Phellinus pomaceus* and other wood-rotting fungi might well be turned to human advantage through biotechnology, according to David Harper from the Queen's University of Belfast in Northern Ireland.

Harper published a paper in *Nature* (**315**:55, 1985) reporting over 90 percent efficiency of the white rot fungus in methylating chloride ions to form chloromethane. Corroborating earlier suspicions, his quantitive data indicated that fungi make a major contribution to the 5 million tons of chloromethane which arrive in the atmosphere from natural sources every year. Maybe, Harper suggested, with such a large natural population of halocarbons, we have been unduly concerned about deleterious effects of man-made halocarbons on the Earth's ozone layer.

Now he is assessing the practical potential of *P. pomaceus* and related organisms. He believes it should be possible to clone the fungal gene for the chloromethane-synthesizing enzyme into bacteria, for example, and thus produce organisms with applications in desalination and other fields where the selective removal of chloride or other halide ions is required. Harper also argues that the halocarbon-synthesizing gene or genes could have a role in breeding salt-tolerant plants for regions where sodium chloride accumulation has rendered the soil unsuitable for previously grown varieties. Because the build-up of chloride in plant tissues is thought to be a major cause of salt poisoning, a means of volatilizing this toxic halide could provide the answer.

Harper points out that the environmental impact of such plants would have to be considered carefully before they were released into the environment for wide-scale cultivation. But, in view of the massive and long-standing production of chloromethane in the biosphere, Harper believes that such dangers may not be so serious as to be prohibitive. **—BD**