Spina bifida trial

Research council goes public

PROFESSIONAL disagreements about the Medical Research Council's spina bifida trial were aired in public last week at a remarkable meeting in London called by the National Childbirth Trust. At the end of last year the council decided to go ahead with a double-blind trial of the efficacy of folic acid and other vitamin supplements in preventing recurrences of neural tube defects (NTD) in human births (see *Nature* 16 December, p.565).

Although last week's meeting seemed to agree that a trial of some kind should be held — the trust's view from the outset — representatives of the trust, including Professor J.H. Edwards (University of Oxford) and Professor Derek Bryce Smith (University of Reading), expressed concern about the levels of vitamin doses to be used, the form in which subjects' consent would be obtained and the criteria to be used for calling off the trial in midstream in the light of accumulated information.

As outlined by Professor Colin Dollery, chairman of MRC's systems board, and Dr Nicholas Wald, coordinator of the trial, a double-blind test involving some 2,000 women will be carried out over a period of five years. Mothers who have already had one NTD birth will be asked to participate by their physicians. If they consent to take part they will be given either one of three vitamin supplements or a control pill for at least 28 days before and 28 days after conception. Since it is impossible to determine when a woman will conceive, some women may be consuming supplementary vitamins for a period of years. The identity of a woman's pill will only be known to a central monitoring committee; neither she nor her doctor will know.

It is this double-blind procedure that both distinguishes the MRC trial from those previously conducted (Smithalls, *Lancet* **i**, 339; 1980) and provides a bone of contention for critics of the trial. Is it ethically sound to withhold a possible treatment, whose effectiveness has been implied if not proved, in order to assess the results beyond reasonable doubt?

Adding fuel to the fire, the doses of folic acid that MRC proposes to administer are ten times greater than those given in previous tests, which were roughly at physiological levels. The reason given by MRC is that these levels will allow the monitoring of urine samples to ensure that supplements have been taken, but the effect of high folate doses is unknown. However, Dr Thomas Mead, chairman of the MRC clinical trials committee, assured last week's meeting that the trial would be halted should either any adverse effects or beneficial effects become apparent.

Since the decision to participate in the trial is clearly a major commitment, both representatives of MRC and their critics agreed over the need fully to inform putative parents before their consent is obtained. However, MRC's outline of the trial procedures does not specify that written consent is required, leaving that to the discretion of the regional centres. It seems likely that this point will be cleared up before plans are finalized.

There was also some concern last week that a decision to enter the trial would not be unbiased but would be strongly influenced by the unique relationship of physicians with their patients. In a survey conducted by the National Childbirth Trust, women expressed a desire to comply with their doctors' requests, and a fear that failure to participate in the trial would result in substandard treatment during pregnancy. However, the majority of women said that they would start taking vitamin supplements independently of medical advice. In the light of this, it is difficult to see how MRC can adequately inform the subjects before obtaining their consent and still secure their participation.

Melanie Kee

Einstein manuscripts on view

MANUSCRIPTS of Albert Einstein are to go on public exhibition for the first time in April 1985, Dr Reuven Yaron of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem said last week. The exhibition, together with a commemorative academic conference, will mark the thirtieth anniversary of Einstein's death, and will also focus on what the archivists of the National Library of Israel see as one of their most important acquisitions.

Under the terms of Einstein's will, his personal papers and manuscripts became part of a trust giving the trustees *carte blanche* to dispose of them, if they saw fit, for the good of the beneficiaries. All manuscripts and papers remaining when the trust was wound up were to pass to the National Library of Israel (housed in the Hebrew University), which Einstein himself helped to found. In the meantime, the manuscripts and papers were housed in the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton University in the United States, to which scholars had access only by special permission of the trustees. In 1977, following prolonged negotiations between the trustees and Princeton University Press, Professor John Stachel began editing the papers and under the same agreement, a microfilm of the entire Einstein archives was deposited in the Princeton University Library.

In 1982, the trust was finally wound up, and a special committee, headed by Dr Yaron, was set up in Jerusalem to deal with the transfer. Moving the manuscripts to Jerusalem should not cause any major delay in the publication of the papers — Professor Stachel is now working from photocopies, and the first volume is due to go to press later this year.

For scholars, the transfer of the papers to Jerusalem should prove beneficial. In addition to the archive microfilm at Princeton, within a year scholars will have easy access to complete photocopies — or, if necessary, the originals — in Jerusalem. The Hebrew University has already entered into a tentative agreement with Princeton to prepare a *catalogue raisonnée* of the manuscripts which should be completed within two years.

Vera Rich

UK parliament

Testing the waters

THE House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, fresh from its largely unsuccessful attempt to improve the provision of scientific advice to the British government, has now added its voice to those who say that British water supplies and sewerage systems are in danger of catastrophic collapse unless more is spent on repair, renewal and research. The report, published last week (*The Water Industry*, HMSO, £6.00), appeared on the eve of the decision by workers in the water industry that they would promptly strike for more pay.

The explanation of the committee's choice of this unfashionable topic for a full-blown study is the transfer in 1973 of responsibility for research and national planning from central government to a number of constitutionally autonomous regional authorities. The committee says that this development has given central government, "especially the present", an opportunity to neglect its responsibilities.

Research spending as such seems to have been increasing more quickly than inflation in recent years, and is estimated at £20 million in the present financial year. Two-thirds of this is spent by the Water Research Centre, the cooperative research organization, supported by subscriptions from the water industry. Government departments responsible for the environment and agriculture each spend £2 million a year. This total does not include the substantial spending of water-related research by research councils and universities.

The committee says there is a danger that too little is being spent on research and that there is a high chance that too little attention is being given to what it calls strategic research — for example, the development of more accurate techniques for finding leaks in water pipes. It asks that the Department of the Environment should assume responsibility for planning a long-term research programme. ●