

chemistry there two years ago. In 1966 he was given the Gairdner Award of Merit for his work in this field.

### More Defenders for Aldabra

THE US National Academy of Sciences has allied itself with the Royal Society in the society's war with the British Ministry of Defence over the proposed airfield on the island of Aldabra in the Indian Ocean. The Academy has been having informal conversations with Federal agencies in the hope that another site might be found.

The Royal Society also announced this week details of an expedition to the island to gather as much information as possible before any development might start. The expedition will consist of three phases: a short-term dry season phase, during this month and next, to complete reconnaissance observations started in 1964, to investigate the lagoon area, to study land molluscs, and to begin long term studies on the giant tortoises, birds and marine life; a long term dry season phase from September to December, to continue the studies on tortoises, birds and marine life; and a wet season phase, from December to March 1968, to continue this study and begin studies on insects and land plants. The overall leader of the expedition is Dr David R. Stoddart, a lecturer in the Geography Department at the University of Cambridge. He helped carry out the reconnaissance observations in 1964.

A decision is expected from the Ministry of Defence on the future of Aldabra by May 1968, but scientists may be able to take heart from the fact that in some circles the strategic value of a base on the island is in doubt. Mr Alastair Buchan, director of the Institute for Strategic Studies, in a letter to *The Times*, said that he had great difficulty in understanding what function a base tucked away in that corner of the Indian Ocean would serve, unless it was for British or American military intervention in Southern and East Africa—a role that had dubious credibility. He suggests that Gan, Diego Garcia and the Cocos Islands provide natural staging bases for south-east Asia unless the ministry is contemplating the bizarre alternative of trooping from Britain to Asia via Ascension and Aldabra, which are 4,500 miles apart, the extreme load range of the most powerful aircraft under development.

### Where to put Reactors

THERE is every prospect that the US Atomic Energy Commission will persist with its cautious policy on the siting of reactors and that it will in the process win the approval of most interested parties. So much can be inferred from the report of the hearings on the licensing and regulation of nuclear reactors held in April and May this year by the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, the report of which has now appeared. The AEC itself, in the person of the chairman, Dr Glen Seaborg, takes the line that more experience of the operation of reactors with the capacity of those now being installed at electricity generating stations will be necessary before it will be possible to lay down criteria for deciding when reactors can be placed, as many of the utility companies would wish, in or near urban areas. In his statement to the joint committee, Dr Seaborg pointed out that although there were in

April 323 nuclear reactors of all types operating in the United States, and although these have accumulated 1,870 reactor-years of operating time, there were only 14 power reactors licensed for civilian operation with an accumulated operating time of 60 reactor-years.

The incentives which tempt utility companies to site reactors close to cities are easy enough to identify, of course. It also seems that in its operation of the licensing procedures, the AEC has been prepared to relax a little the stringency of its rules for deciding how close to centres of urban population reactors can be sited. In granting permission for the operation of a reactor, the AEC specifies a region called an exclusion zone around the reactor which must be entirely within the control of the reactor operator, and then a more extensive area in which the population must be low. The sizes of both areas are determined by the size of the reactor and by some of its design characteristics. In the consent for the building of the San Onofre plant in California, the AEC reduced the exclusion distance from 0.8 miles to 0.5 miles, while the radius of the low population zone was reduced from 12.5 miles to 4 miles. In some respects this site is exceptional, chiefly because it is surrounded by a military reservation, but it appears that similar relaxations of the strictest rules have since been applied to power reactors being constructed in New England.

### Making Medicine Scientific

A FRESH look at the scientific and technical services in British hospitals is to be taken by a committee set up jointly by the Minister of Health and the Secretary of State for Scotland. As the ministry points out, there has been a rapid increase in the use of science and technology in medicine, but so far the expansion has been disjointed and has not followed a coherent policy. The committee will be considering the future organization of the scientific and technical services, and the broad pattern of staffing required. It will be making recommendations to the ministers.

The scope of the survey will be wide. It is to cover the use of physicists, biochemists and physiologists, with their supporting technicians, which will presumably include all the laboratories within the health service. It is also likely to include the newer services such as the cervical cancer smear tests. Since the intention here is to make smear tests available to all women at risk, large laboratory facilities are likely to be needed. The problems of staffing renal dialysis units—the reason given by the ministry several months ago for the slow expansion of the units—might also be worth considering. There are also enormous possibilities of mechanization in intensive care units, with the possibility of continuously monitoring the patient's condition automatically. So far the health service has done little in this direction.

The new committee is to be chaired by Sir Solly Zuckerman, Chief Scientific Adviser at the Cabinet Office and chairman of the Advisory Council on Science and Technology. The other members will be Professor A. R. Currie of the University of Aberdeen, Dr R. Gaddie from the General Hospital at Birmingham, Professor J. E. Roberts from the Middlesex Hospital and the University of London, Mr. A. B. Scott from the United Manchester Hospitals Board of Governors, Professor J. P. Shillingford from the Hammersmith Hospital,