

Although there is no evidence that the Beckenham vaccine was directly responsible for the reported encephalitis, supplies are being frozen all over the world until further evidence has been assembled. This unfortunate setback is almost certain to cause a shortage in the mass measles vaccination programme announced by Mr Kenneth Robinson, then Minister of Health, in February 1968. But in spite of this, as a spokesman at the ministry pointed out, there are no plans to import vaccine from overseas. Some 500,000 children under the age of 14 were vaccinated during the first 4 months of the programme; recent figures are unfortunately not available.

POWER STATIONS

Too Much Delay

POWER stations built for the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) tend not to be built on time. The reason, according to a committee of inquiry under Sir Alan Wilson which reported last week, has less to do with technical faults than with management problems (*Report of the Committee of Enquiry into Delays in Commissioning CEGB Power Stations*, HMSO, 5s). The report makes clear the magnitude of the problem. At present, the power station programme is running about 18 months late, and there seems little hope of reducing the backlog before the end of 1972. Between 1959 and 1967, 22 new power stations involving 70 generating sets were released for construction, and the report is based on an analysis of the delays that occurred. Of the 70 generating sets, 30 are known or expected to be more than twelve months late, involving 14 power stations. The reason is not that the CEGB is excessively optimistic about the time needed to build a station—the targets it set itself are if anything less ambitious than in the United States where power stations are usually finished on time.

The difference, according to the report, is that the CEGB management is less effective than its American counterparts. The chief cause of the delays which the report points out occurred in the early 1960s, when the programme was increased to cover the shortage of electricity which was then becoming apparent. But the expanded programme turned out to be too much for the CEGB and its contractors to cope with. The report therefore urges more efficient long term planning, which would also have anticipated the fall in demand which has now left the CEGB with far too much capacity. The burst of activity during the early 1960s also found the management structure in the CEGB and in the contract industry less well defined than it might have been. One of the chief criticisms of the CEGB is that, perhaps unwittingly, it is placing too much emphasis on the engineering aspects of its brief to the detriment of management. And with the construction of a power station involving up to ten large contractors accounting for about 70 per cent of the cost, with many different workers from different trades on the site, effective management is a prerequisite for completion on time.

But much of this is past history. The committee also enquired whether the CEGB has learnt its lesson, and the conclusion is that by and large it has not. This is why the report says it does not expect a major

improvement in the backlog until much nearer the end of the 1972 deadline. A number of suggestions are put forward. The CEGB should reduce the amount of time consuming dialogue with the contractors over the specifications, the number of contractors should be reduced and there should be more allowance for design difficulties when prototype machines are installed. The committee is also surprised at the scant attention paid by either the employers or the unions to labour relations on the site.

OPEN UNIVERSITY

Physicist of the Air

It seems that Dr Gerald F. Elliott has been appointed the professor of physics of the Open University, Britain's University of the Air, which is planned to start broadcasting in late 1970 or early 1971. Dr Elliott is at present a member of the Medical Research Council's Biophysics Unit at King's College, London, although for the past several months he has been on leave of absence at the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Ever since taking his first degree in physics at Oxford, he has been a member of the muscle group at King's, which is headed by Professor Jean Hanson and included, until he recently took a chair in Denmark, Dr Jack Lowy. Dr Elliott is, of course, well known for his X-ray diffraction studies of muscle. As a physicist who works with biological systems, he is ideally suited to the interdisciplinary approach to science which the Open University promises.

The most serious drawback of the Open University, as far as staff are concerned, is the provision of facilities for research. The Open University has said that its staff will be given research facilities, presumably at Milton Keynes when it has settled down there. It is, however, difficult to see how the Open University can hope to match the facilities provided by conventional universities, or indeed whether it is sense for it even to try. There is a strong case for arguing that the Open University would do better by encouraging its staff, if need be by arming them with grants, to find laboratory space in the nearby conventional universities.

INFORMATION RESOURCES

Data for Innovation

from a Correspondent

ASLIB seems to have embarked on a programme to reassess the importance of information services as adjuncts of industrial innovation. At a symposium held at the University of Nottingham on March 21 and 22, Dr Jeremy Bray, Joint Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Technology, emphasized the need that industrial leaders should continually be trained and retrained. He also pointed out that innovation too often seems to be outside the control of society, and urged a shift of emphasis away from a concern with techniques to a concern with goals: society should decide its goals and implement innovations which will further those goals.

Mr Dargan Bullivant argued that information should be treated like raw material which has to be processed to the specific needs of the firm. Mr J. K. L. Thompson of the Ministry of Technology drew attention to the