

All very well for the cable companies (who are having no trouble finding people willing to invest their money in what they see as tomorrow's goldmines), but what about protection of the broadcasters? What they do offer is television, or radio, programmes free to the public. Cable companies charge a fee (about \$5 a month in the United States) for wiring a home for television; people are willing to pay this because of the better reception or the increased choice of programme involved, but obviously there are many who, having scraped together the money for the set, could not afford the further cost. The Rand report concludes, perhaps too optimistically, that as long as cable television operators pay broadcasting stations for the signals that they take from the air, the broadcasters should find that what they lose in advertising revenue they would gain, roughly speaking, in royalties. The Rand theory is that just as radio broadcast has continued to grow in the face of competition from television, broadcast television should grow in spite of, or perhaps even because of, cable television. If legal restrictions were necessary, these might take the form of giving the broadcaster an exclusive period of time during which the cable operators might not show his programme.

Cable television has grown enormously in the United States, where it accounts for about six per cent of all the television reception. Its most spectacular growth, however, has been in Canada, where it is popular because of its ability to bring the signals of American broadcasting stations. Montreal has the largest concentration of cable television subscribers (100,000) in the world. In Britain, Rediffusion Ltd has just unveiled a system which could distribute twenty television programmes to entire towns or to a large housing estate and, moreover, is capable of being two-way; programmes could be injected from any part of the network.

PARKINSONISM

Scowen Committee Defied

THE British company that intends to sell the scarce drug L-dopa, used for treating Parkinson's disease without submitting it to the Scowen Committee on the Safety of Drugs, has received a sharp reproof from the Department of Health and Social Security. Mr Malcolm Sinclair, director of Chemica Laboratories Ltd, said last week that although he had offered the committee samples of his product, he was not prepared to divulge his manufacturing secrets. Because he felt unable to withhold his supplies from the home market any longer, he would by-pass the committee. The Department of Health, on behalf of the committee, quickly retorted that Chemica had ignored advice given to its representative last October, and had provided none of the required information about its preparation of L-dopa. Manufacturing procedures, the department points out, are treated in strict confidence, and no problem has arisen in dealing with nearly 600 other organizations.

The drug at the centre of this argument was first investigated as a possible cure for Parkinsonism after the discovery that drugs which cause a decrease in amounts of monoamines, particularly dopamine, in the brain can cause the disease (*Nature*, 223, 889; 1969). Trials so far have shown that the L-form of this amine can relieve the symptoms—including rigid limbs

and trembling hands and legs—in some but not all sufferers. It may also have side effects such as nausea and lowering of the blood pressure. In trials in the United States some patients suffered such ill effects that treatment had to stop. Only 5 per cent of patients experienced a real cure, although another 55 per cent were partly improved.

In Britain the very short supplies of L-dopa have been restricted to MRC clinical trials on the decision of the Department of Health. Until last week the only preparation passed by the Scowen committee for use in the trials was made by Roche in Switzerland. But now two more firms, whose names have not been revealed, have received clearance for clinical studies of their preparations in the treatment of Parkinsonism.

This should help to ease the shortage of supplies, which Mr Sinclair of Chemica says is one reason why he is going to sell his unscreened preparation in Britain. For fourteen months, he says, his company withheld supplies for ethical reasons, only to find that its exports were being imported back to Britain and sold at exorbitant prices. This, combined with the pressure of enquiries from doctors and patients, has given Chemica no choice but to sell its preparation direct to British doctors, who are, of course, free to prescribe the drug if they consider that it will benefit their patients.

Submission of drugs to the Scowen committee is at present entirely voluntary. A company wishing to market a drug approaches the committee with details of the preparation and trials carried out. If the committee is satisfied with the evidence, the drug is passed for sale; this apparently simple procedure is common with many of the preparations submitted. In the case of L-dopa, clearance has been restricted to the clinical trials, which are not expected to be completed for some months. Some people have been feeling impatient with the committee's slowness in making more supplies available. Among them is the Parkinson's Disease Society, which has been urging the Department of Health to improve the situation. Founded a year ago, the society is principally concerned with the social welfare of sufferers, but has made its voice felt on the question of L-dopa, which it believes to be a useful treatment, but not a cure. Although anxious to see more supplies made available, the society cannot support Chemica in flouting the Scowen committee.

ENRICHED URANIUM

Questions from Europe

WHEN the news that the terms of the centrifuge agreement had been approved by Britain, the Netherlands and West Germany was announced just before Christmas, after long and hard negotiations, the Ministry of Technology made light of the condition that the agreement also had to be submitted to the European Commission for approval. It must have seemed that the commission was hardly likely to object, with the European Community's nuclear club—Euratom—still in something of a parlous state despite recent life-saving efforts. It now seems that the ministry was over-optimistic about what seemed to be a formality.

Both the Netherlands and West Germany are members of Euratom, and under Article 103 of the Euratom treaty a member state has to submit draft agreements involving non-Euratom organizations to the European Commission. If the agreement contains clauses which