

OLD WORLD

DRUG DEPENDENCE

Lack of Knowledge

A REPORT on drug dependence, published this week by the World Health Organization, is a salutary reminder of the lack of knowledge about drug addiction. Drawn up by an expert committee on drug dependence, the report (WHO Technical Report, No. 460, 1970; 6s) makes a few tentative suggestions and offers one or two conclusions, but the chief message to emerge is that more research—both sociological and pharmacological—needs to be done before any course of action for treatment or prevention of drug addiction can properly be evaluated. But the report does provide a useful, if sketchy, review of the various methods and goals of treatment and prevention, and it offers one clear recommendation—that the drug propiram should be considered as a dependence-producing drug comparable with codeine. The committee therefore suggests that propiram should be brought under the terms of the 1931 convention on narcotic drugs.

Unfortunately, there are almost as many hypotheses about the onset of drug dependence as there are experts to make them. The factors involved are usually closely linked with the psychological make-up and the social environment of the individual drug taker, and it is therefore difficult to make generalizations about the efficacy of various methods for preventing widespread drug dependence. But the WHO committee points out that psychosomatic disorders clearly could not result in drug dependence if access to drugs is denied. The committee therefore believes that legal control of the distribution of drugs is one of the most important means of controlling drug abuse, but suggests that “the most pressing need is to understand the various mechanisms of spread—for example, the parts played by the confirmed users of various types of drug”.

But legal controls on drugs that are over-ambitious are likely to be unrealistic and self-discrediting, the committee warns. In particular, possible harmful effects must be borne in mind, for example “rapid suppression of the use of opium might lead to the introduction of other drugs, such as heroin or drugs of the amphetamine, barbiturate or other types”. In the face of the uncertainty about the efficacy of legal controls, it is reasonable to hope that education may help to deter potential users. But the committee pours cold water on such hopes, at least in the immediate future, suggesting that “there are many reasons to doubt” that simple educational programmes will be sufficient to prevent drug dependence. Nevertheless, the

committee suggests that educational measures should be directed towards changing the attitudes of the community toward drugs in general. “The advertising of pharmaceutical products in some countries may have had the result of encouraging the free and uncritical use of drugs in general,” the committee believes, and there is also a need to counteract recent pro-drug propaganda.

As far as treatment for drug dependence is concerned, the committee believes that the British system of maintenance, in which an addict is supplied with daily doses of heroin, and the methadone maintenance treatment widely used in the United States both have their advantages and drawbacks. But a valid comparison between the two approaches cannot be made because of differences in the sociocultural environments and in the practice of medicine in the two countries. Both systems, however, share some success in limiting the obtaining of illicit drug supplies by the patient, and the committee points out that since the introduction of this approach in Britain, new cases of heroin dependence have been appearing much less frequently.

BLACK ARROW

Launch Postponed

A SECOND attempt to launch a British satellite with the Black Arrow rocket has been put back by about three months. Originally planned for late spring this year, the launch has been postponed to late summer—probably September—chiefly because of the fault in the second stage of the rocket which resulted in failure to launch a satellite last September. The next launch attempt will, however, still take place with the X3 satellite, as planned before the last failure. The Ministry of Aviation Supply, which is now responsible for the Black Arrow project, has therefore decided to risk a firing with a satellite worth about £2 million instead of making further inroads into the stock of rockets on order by repeating the September firing.

The Ministry is still, however, being coy about precisely what happened to the second stage of the rocket last September. But it seems that the fault was in the pressurization of the second stage oxidant tank; this caused the engine to stop 13 seconds too soon, and the third stage could not take the satellite into orbit. Luckily, the fault seems to have been relatively minor and little design modification will be necessary.

The X3 satellite will be essentially a technological satellite designed to test solar cells, thermal surfaces and a data handling system developed at Farnborough, but it will also carry a micro-meteorite experiment from the University of Birmingham. As for plans to launch

further satellites, little can be said at present. The budget for the Black Arrow project, which was set at about £3 million last year, rising to about £5 million in future years, is unlikely to escape entirely unscathed by the government's cuts in public expenditure. As one scientist said last week, the project “is being torn up by the roots every few months to see if it is still growing”.

ARCHAEOLOGY

“Rescue” to the Rescue

MANY of the hundreds of historic sites presently at risk in Britain could be saved if proposals put forward by a recently formed archaeological association are adopted. Launched at what may have been the largest meeting of professional and amateur archaeologists ever held in Britain and appropriately christened “Rescue”, the association aims to prevent the unwitting destruction of ancient sites by operations such as deep ploughing, afforestation and quarrying or urban developments such as the construction of new towns, airports and motorways.

The organizers of “Rescue” aim to achieve their objective in two ways: by raising funds through subscriptions, appeals and donations which can be used to finance full time central and regional administration, and by providing a source of informed and authoritative advice which could give town and country planners some idea of the archaeological risk involved in projected development schemes.

The need for such a campaign has been clear to archaeologists for many years, but the urgency has become apparent only recently. The present rate of destruction is appalling; some twenty to thirty deserted medieval villages are lost each year, and of 450 recorded Bronze age burial mounds in Gloucestershire, only one group remains intact. Although the amount of money which the government makes available for the preservation of historic sites has increased almost ten-fold in the last decade, the Walsh report, published late last year (Cmd 3904), concluded that the resources available are quite inadequate to cope with the problem. Finance alone is no solution, however, as Professor G. W. Dimbleby of the Institute of Archaeology, London University, emphasized last week. He felt that archaeological rescue operations frequently fall short of their potential. Too often archaeological items only are conserved and little thought is given to environmental aspects.

A strong element of realism runs through “Rescue's” thinking on conservation. It claims to be campaigning not for the wholesale preservation of ancient sites, nor seeking needlessly to obstruct urban progress, but it is asking for the