

Conley said, "If I had to select a genetic disease for which there is a real and well founded hope of progress, it would be sickle cell anaemia".

CANCER RESEARCH

Fort Detrick Lives Again

by our Washington Correspondent

A NEAT solution of the twin problems of what to do with a redundant laboratory and of how to spend the vastly increased budget for cancer research was provided this week when President Nixon announced that the former biological warfare research station at Fort Detrick would be turned over to the National Cancer Institute for cancer research. The complex of nine laboratories at the Maryland research station were once the most sophisticated facilities for research on bacteriological weapons in the United States. But all that was stopped in 1969, and the future of Fort Detrick has since been in the balance.

Last year, the Senate voted to give the National Institutes of Health the \$15 million needed to convert Fort Detrick's laboratories from bacteriological warfare research to a variety of biomedical research problems. It was then believed that the laboratories would be used chiefly by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and by the National Cancer Institute, for research on hazardous viruses and on suspected tumour viruses. The special facilities at Fort Detrick, which include negative pressure rooms to prevent escape of dangerous organisms and excellent culture and storage facilities, are expensive and ideal for virus research of all kinds.

The Senate's decision, the result of an amendment introduced by Senator Charles Mathias of Maryland, was, however, reversed by a conference committee which asked that the proposals should be further studied by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. In the meantime, the research station's complement of microbiologists, whose future had been uncertain since the decision to renounce offensive bacteriological weapons was taken in 1969, began to leave the station in droves.

The decision to beat a sword into a ploughshare by transferring Fort Detrick from warfare research to study the problems of cancer was announced last Monday when President Nixon visited the establishment. Pointing out that the transfer would "help advance important public goals even as we alleviate the economic burdens which threaten idle workers and their families", Nixon said that he hopes the conversion would be completed by early 1972. The research station may provide work for up to 700 cancer researchers.

President Nixon also used the opportunity to give publicity to his \$100 million dollar request for additional funds for cancer research, and to the Administration's cancer cure pro-

gramme, which was passed by the Senate in July. "I again urge the House of Representatives to act promptly on this matter so we can get on with this important work," he said.

Short Notes

Justification for NASA

A RECENT address by Dr James C. Fletcher, Administrator of NASA, brought out the following juggling of figures to justify NASA's budget: "Let us put NASA's budget figure in perspective along with the rest of the federal budget. \$3,300 million is actually less than one and a half cents of the federal budget dollar. We are already spending 42 cents of the federal budget dollar on human resources, including health, income, security and veterans benefits. And we are also spending 34 cents of the federal budget dollar on national defence. So even if the space programme were abolished entirely—which would be a calamity for this country—the amount available for other programmes, one and a half cents, would be relatively insignificant.

"Looking at it another way, \$3,300 million is less than one third of one per cent of the gross national product and it is only 16 dollars for each person in this country." Looking at it another way, \$3,300 million is \$700 million more than Congress appropriated for housing and urban development.

Cannikin

CRITICS of the AEC's plan to explode a five megaton nuclear weapon under Amchitka Island this month were disappointed in their expectation that President Nixon would announce cancellation, or at least postponement, of the test, when he met Emperor Hirohito of Japan recently. The White House is in fact now saying that President Nixon may not have any intention of calling the test off, that an announcement to go ahead can be expected soon now that Mr Kosygin's visit to Canada is over. The test is designed to monitor the X-ray output of the warhead of the Spartan anti-ballistic missile that forms the long-range component of the Safeguard ABM system.

NASA

DATA gathered by the Earth Resources Technology Satellite (ERTS-A) and the Earth Resources Experiment Package (EREP) carried on Skylab will be used

to provide information on such diverse topics as vegetation damage from highway construction in Maine to the movement of sediment in San Francisco. ERTS-A will be launched in spring 1972, and Skylab is scheduled for launch early in 1973. These Earth monitoring and data gathering satellites have drawn the greatest number of proposals ever received by NASA for any scientific satellite—700 had been submitted by June this year, of which some 430 have initially been selected.

The satellites, which are intended primarily to study the feasibility of remote sensing from satellites of natural resources, will provide multispectral images of the Earth's surface. Similar techniques were also employed aboard a high-flying aircraft recently used with some success in an experiment conducted jointly by NASA and the Department of Agriculture designed to gather information on southern corn leaf blight in the United States. The aircraft surveyed 72,000 square kilometres of cornlands between June and September with infrared photography.

Methotrexate

THE Food and Drug Administration has decided to allow the controversial drug methotrexate to be used for severe cases of psoriasis, a debilitating skin disease. The latest issue of the *FDA Bulletin* includes an outline of the cases in which the drug should be used: they include only those cases of psoriasis that have proved to be resistant to conventional treatment, and the drug should be dispensed to patients only by the physician.

This announcement follows three days of hearings on the FDA's handling of methotrexate by the House Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee, after which Benjamin S. Rosenthal, a vocal critic of FDA policies, and Mr L. Fountain, chairman of the subcommittee, accused the FDA of extreme negligence in taking no action to stop physicians from illicitly prescribing the drug. Mr Fountain warned the FDA that since there had been 71 adverse reactions to methotrexate reported during the eight years that it had been on trial, the drug ought not to be licensed for use against psoriasis.