

ETHICS

Another Commission

by our Washington Correspondent

THE standard way to deal with any vexed problem is to appoint a committee to chew over the issue in the hope that it will come up with a workable solution. The social, ethical and legal implications of advances in biochemical research are, it seems, no exceptions to this general rule, for the Senate last week agreed to appoint a full-scale commission to take a hard look at the ethical problems associated with organ transplants, abortion, prenatal diagnosis of genetic defects, genetic engineering and a host of other problems now troubling some members of the medical and scientific community. If the commission does see the light of day—compamion legislation is bogged down in committee in the House of Representatives—it will rightly be based on the assumption that such issues transcend the expertise of health scientists and, as the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare says in its report on the legislation, “We can no longer ask them to grapple with these issues alone”.

The legislation designed to set up the commission was reported out of the Labor and Public Health Committee early last week, and approved by the Senate with little discussion four days later. It calls for the setting up of a fifteen-member commission appointed by the President from the fields of medicine, law, theology, biological science, social science, philosophy, humanities, health administration, government and public affairs. It is intended that the commission would deliberate for two years, at the end of which it would submit a report to Congress and the President of its findings and recommendations.

Among the duties with which the commission will be charged are to analyse and evaluate “scientific and technological advances in the biological sciences, past, current and projected, and then to assess the implications of such advances for individuals and for society”. An equally important part of the commission’s work would be to analyse public understanding of such issues through the use of seminars and public hearings, and to evaluate public attitudes to biomedical research. The legislation authorizes an expenditure of up to \$1 million for each of the two years for the commission to perform this Herculean task.

One day of hearings on the legislation, held early in November, elicited considerable support for the idea from members of the biomedical community, although almost without exception, the witnesses drew attention to the complexity of the task facing such a com-

mission. Dr Abram Chayes of Harvard Law School, for example, suggested that the commission is needed because it would have the time and resources that have been missing from previous attempts to view the problems, and Dr John Najarian of the University of Minnesota said that the commission would do valuable work if it came up with guidelines on, for example, what is considered to be a definition of death.

A note of warning was, however, sounded by reports and testimony from members of government agencies. Dr DuVal, Assistant Secretary for Health and Scientific Affairs of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, said, for example, that “the issues are so complex and the underlying currents of change moving so swiftly that in our view no attempt to describe this particular healthscape, at what would have to be a given moment of time, could be definitive for long”. But the committee does not agree, for it is looking to the commission to recommend procedures to grapple with the important problems on a continuing basis. Perhaps the most valuable accomplishment of such a commission, however, would be to open up to public discussion important ethical and social issues that have in the past been unnecessarily private.

PREDATOR CONTROL

How to Kill Coyotes

by our Washington Correspondent

LAST year, 74,000 coyotes were killed as a result of federally financed poisoning programmes, which have been under

the control of the Department of Agriculture for the past 40 years. But, according to Senator Gale W. McGee, there has never been a census taken of the number of coyotes in the United States, and “while it appears we have been attacking the problem with vigour and persistence, we have not made any attempt whatsoever to determine and define the scope of the problem itself”. This and other aspects of predator control in the United States will, however, be the subject of an inquiry next week by Senator McGee’s Agriculture Environmental and Consumer Protection Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

For many years, it has been the practice of predator control programmes to kill predators whenever and wherever they appear, with poisoning usually the first line of attack. The effects of such policies on non-target species are too numerous to mention, but of particular concern are episodes such as the killing of several dozen eagles in Wyoming earlier this year during an unauthorized control programme.

Another aspect of the problem which Senator McGee hopes to look at during his hearings is the scope of the damage that is done each year to livestock by predators. The Department of Agriculture, for example, estimates that in 1970 predators accounted for the loss of some 130,000 sheep in Wyoming, but it is not clear how that estimate was derived. Without at least any attempt to determine the scope of the problem, no realistic policies can be formulated, and the Department of Agriculture will clearly have to defend its frontier tactics of simply killing everything in sight without taking stock of the situation.

Short Notes

DDT in the Oceans

NEARLY 20 million tons of DDT have been manufactured in the world since 1944, of which as much as 25 per cent may have been transferred to the sea. About 0.1 per cent of all the DDT ever produced, or 20,000 tons, resides in the marine biota. So estimates a panel of the National Research Council in a report published last month (*Chlorinated Hydrocarbons in the Marine Environment*. Panel on Monitoring Persistent Pesticides in the Marine Environment. NRC, Washington, 44 pp.).

Research on Research

NOT merely is it possible to sponsor research on transportation but, as the Science Council of Canada has shown in its Special Study No. 17, now published, it is possible to sponsor research on research on transportation. The first volume, mercifully short, of this

three-volume study, says that twenty man-months of professional effort “cannot pretend to have done more than scratch the surface”. Even so, the document does play a good deal with numbers, pointing out that research on transportation, equipment as well as distance, amounts to only \$40 million a year, rather less than 0.5 per cent of total expenditure on transportation as such. Worse still, most professional effort goes on such things as air transport. The document pleads that there should be a fuller appreciation of the need for a systems approach in the study, the design and the operation of transport systems—that industry should be regarded as part of the system of research, that there should be less chauvinism and more international collaboration on good works such as the development of new methods of transport.