

bidge's brief reign at the RGO. This is at the University of Sussex, where first Professor W. H. McCrea retired and was replaced by Professor Martin Rees; on Rees's appointment to the Plumian Chair, the job at Sussex was again vacant, and has now gone to Professor L. Mestel, previously of the University of Manchester.

Geoffrey Burbidge, speaking from San Diego this week, said that he totally supported his wife's actions. He said "we are both totally frustrated about the situation. The whole thing is a mess—we have tried and we have certainly failed". But there is one bright note. Margaret Burbidge, according to her husband, is willing to remain on the board of the Anglo-Australian telescope if she is asked to.

It was a year ago that Geoffrey Burbidge, in a letter to *Nature*, condemned British optical astronomy as being "third rate" (*Nature*, 239, 117; 1972). He said this week that he still stood by what he had written then. "The British astronomical establishment has consistently over the period since the war refused to face the real world or accept that anything was the matter, and when important decisions were made they were either hopelessly wrong or too late or both", said Professor Burbidge in 1972.

Is there a solution to the problems which Geoffrey Burbidge sees in British optical astronomy? In his letter critical of the way in which this branch of astronomy is organised he says that "the only hope [to retrieve the situation in Britain] would appear to be the creation of a new group or organisation with an international background which will set itself the single goal of creating somewhere in the world an optical observatory which, as far as climate and instrumentation are concerned, is second to none". It seems, from the experiences of the past two years, that at least this must be done to attract British expatriate astronomers back from the United States.

#### GLAXO LECTURE

### Medical Research Policy

THERE is a need to bring young scientists more adequately into decision making, according to Professor W. S. Peart of St. Mary's Hospital, London. Professor Peart was speaking last week at the Royal Institution in a meeting organised by Glaxo to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Glaxo Volume*.

In his lecture entitled 'Medical Research is too important to be left to the researchers!', Professor Peart followed the life of an imaginary young man aiming towards a career in renal diseases but who was frustrated at every

turn by administrative changes. After endless disappointments the young man finally became a lobbyist for a scientific society and was under-employed ever after.

Professor Peart contrasted the career of today's young man with that of Richard Bright the early nineteenth century doctor whose brilliant career was helped along not a little by the apparent lack of any administrative ability to prevent him doing what he wanted.

Each of the obstacles the present-day Richard Bright encountered were tied in with specific actions by governments and learned societies, and lest it be thought that the system in the United States was any better, Professor Peart threw in trans-Atlantic swerves in policy for good measure. He enunciated three principles which seemed to permeate much policy making; direction without discussion, direction despite discussion and change for change's sake.

What remedies did he see for the problems of today? The educational system is a hurdle race with a very rigid set of rules governing the careers appropriate to particular qualifications. He doubted that there was as great a need for specialising as medical training implied. He contrasted the four or five academic hurdles that are placed in the way of the prospective researcher if he first qualifies in medicine, with the two that all other researchers need to overcome.

Scientists should watch very carefully the growth of a centralised governmental control for research linked to the Treasury. Once a central bureaucracy is installed it is difficult to keep decisions away from governmental influence and political control. Unprejudiced advice to governments was needed, and yet governments would willingly absorb advisory bodies to ensure that they got the advice they wanted. Professor Peart drew parallels here with President Nixon's cancer initiative and political attempts in the United States to change student training programmes and make students contract with the state to repay their education bill.

Scientists could do a much better job of communicating with society and in particular with politicians said Professor Peart. Several learned societies in the United States had made a start with the congressional science fellowship programme and although he was not convinced that this was anything more than a public relations exercise, Professor Peart felt there was a need for some structure in relations with politicians, particularly those outside the government. A science advisor as such finds himself very constricted by his allegiance to government and hence to

a reticence and a segregation from the main body of science.

Professor Peart concluded by emphasising the importance of a continuing commitment to the young. New ideas come from the young and all organisation in science and medicine should be directed towards helping the best young minds to be creative. This could effectively be done only if young scientists were given a greater perception of the decision-making process and a chance to get involved in that process themselves.

#### SCIENCE POLICY

### Cambridge's Gain

"THE New Master of Jesus" ran the headline in last Saturday's *Guardian* over an article which announced that Sir Alan Cottrell, the British Government's Chief Scientific Advisor had been appointed master of a Cambridge College. A higher position than this would be hard to envisage for Sir Alan, but it will not be until next April that he will be leaving the corridors of power and committing himself to Jesus.

Sir Alan will succeed Sir Denys Page, the present master, who is retiring on March 31. Sir Alan is no stranger to Cambridge, for, as well as still living there, he was Goldsmiths Professor of Metallurgy at the university from 1958 to 1965.

After then he was at the Ministry of Defence, first as the Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor and in 1967 he was made Chief Advisor. In 1968 he moved to the Cabinet Office where he was Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor to the government before he was made Chief Advisor in 1971.

Sir Alan's move opens the way for a rearranging of the powers of the Chief Scientific Advisor if it is felt necessary. It has been apparent for some time that the reorganisation of government science in the wake of Lord Rothschild's report and the subsequent white paper in the summer of 1972 has given the departments much more power than they had previously. It can be inferred that the Chief Scientific Advisor's powers and influence have changed, but there are no outward signs yet of the extent of these changes.

#### Correction

In last week's *Nature*, 245, 346, Professor Tinbergen was erroneously credited, in column 2, with early work involving "seal studies". This should have read "field studies".