

THE recent assurances given by the Soviet government to the United States about the position of Jewish would-be emigrants seems to promise a considerable improvement in the lot of those scientists dismissed from their posts and subsequently subjected to official harassment as a consequence of their application for a visa for Israel. That is, provided a serious attempt is made to implement them! A spokesman for the Medical and Scientific Committee for Soviet Jewry admitted, however, to a "certain amount of scepticism" concerning the announcements. "When we actually see the bargain being implemented . . . , when the activists in Moscow are allowed to go, when Voronel is free from harassment and this seminar allowed to function without interruption, then we shall feel that our work has borne fruit. Not until then. Meanwhile Voronel is once more in hiding and the trial of Dr Shtern is due to begin."

The case of Dr Mikhail Shtern, Director of the Department of Endocrinology at a hospital in Vinnitsa (Ukrainian SSR) does, indeed, seem to justify this cautious attitude. Dr Shtern and his wife applied in September 1973 for visas for Israel. Since then they have been subjected to continuous and systematic harassment, including searches of their apartment, the dismissal of their sons, both scientists, and their sons' wives, from their professional posts, and the interrogation of Dr Shtern himself on a number of charges.

These have changed, over the months, from straightforward dissidence, "causing the hospital to harbour incorrect ideological tendencies" and "accepting bribes from patients", to attempted murder of child patients. This last accusation, on which Dr Shtern currently faces trial, represents a new trend in the pattern of accusation—would be emigrants having been in-

Promises, promises

from Vera Rich, London

dicted so far mainly on relatively minor charges of "hooliganism". To the observer, it seems reminiscent, on the one hand, of the notorious 'Doctors plot' of the last days of Stalinism and, on the other, of an atavistic re-emergence of the old "ritual murder" charge.

Although the charge is far more serious than any so far brought, the pattern is running true to form. It hardly needs the statements made last September by two relatives of former patients of Dr Shtern, that the investigating authorities have been compelling patients to give false testimony that "the doctor whom they had trusted and respected for 30 years intended and attempted to poison their children", to see in this prosecution the usual harassment of the would-be emigrant; indeed, in May, the Pro-

curator of Vinnitsa admitted as much himself. Nevertheless, the gravity of the charges is evoking considerable concern in the West, and a number of eminent scientists and doctors, including Lord Hunt of Fawley, Professor William Stanley Peart, and Professor Sir Ludwig Guttman have taken part in a campaign of letters, telegrams and telephone calls to the All-Union and Ukrainian Medical Academies, and the Vinnitsa Procurator's Office—so far without any effective reply.

The trial was scheduled for October 30 but enquiries made by Dr Shtern's sons, Viktor and Avgust, to the Procurator's office, elicited only the information that the legal proceedings were "no business" of theirs. The only news forthcoming is that the 56-year-old doctor is in a serious state of health, with internal haemorrhage from a duodenal ulcer and tuberculosis. He is at present being held in an underground room and is to be visited by a medical commission.

It is, of course, possible that the refusal of the Vinnitsa Procurator's Office to reveal any details of the proceedings may be a first stage in the tacit dropping of the charges as part of the new agreement. Even if this should be the case, the manner of the deed, the almost sadistic detailing of the prisoner's medical condition to relatives allowed no access to him, can hardly be seen as a favourable augury for the promised new deal for Soviet Jews.

WITH talk of massive cutbacks in federal spending to help fight inflation, and with the 1976 budget just three months from publication, some members of the scientific community in the United States are getting the jitters. And well they might, for expenditures on science and technology fall almost totally in the so-called controllable category of the federal budget, thus making them prime targets for reduction.

One area which is clearly going to be hard pressed is high energy physics, and the Zero Gradient Synchrotron (ZGS), a proton accelerator located near Chicago, is a likely candidate for extinction. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which prepares the Administration's budget request, has already decided that the ZGS should soon be consigned to the technological scrap heap, for earlier this year it asked the Atomic Energy Commission and the National Science Foundation to develop a "plan for shutting down the ZGS accelerator at the earliest possible time".

The rationale for that decision is that since money for high energy physics is unlikely to grow in these

Foot on the brake for accelerators

by Colin Norman, Washington

times of financial stringency, and with the new Fermi National Accelerator soaking up a rapidly growing proportion of funds available for that esoteric science there just is not enough money to operate all the particle accelerators at a reasonable level. The ZGS machine being the least powerful of the high energy accelerators, and also being located close to the new Fermi accelerator, looked like the logical one to shut down.

There is, of course, nothing new in such a trend. To accommodate the growing operating budget for the Fermi machine—which began work about two years ago—the Atomic Energy Commission cut off funds for the Princeton-Pennsylvania accelerator in 1971, axed the Cambridge Electron Accelerator a year later, and is now in the process of converting the Bevatron from a

high energy machine into a heavy ion accelerator.

But, having decided that the ZGS should be the next to go, the office of Management and Budget must have been astonished at the advice it received on how the deed should be done. A special AEC-NSF committee which was set up to develop a plan for shutting down the ZGS, told the budget cutters in an unpublished report last month that it found the ZGS programme to be "vigorous and innovative" and that it could see "no scientific or technical reason to recommend a shutdown at this time". Ask a silly question . . .

The committee pointed out that some features of the ZGS are unique, and that just because it is operated at a relatively low energy does not necessarily mean that it is the most expendable of the high energy accelerators. To confuse the OMB people even further, the committee recommended that operation of the ZGS should be continued "possibly at a more intensive level" for the next four years, and that mid-1979 should be considered the earliest reasonable time to shut the machine down. □