

PERHAPS the most comprehensive survey yet conducted of the effects of legalised abortion in the United States has just been published by the Institute of Medicine, an organisation which is part of the National Academy of Sciences. It offers strong evidence to support the oft-heard contention that liberalised abortion laws save many women's lives because they result in a larger proportion of abortions being conducted in proper medical surroundings, rather than in the offices of back-street practitioners or by self-induced means.

The basis of the survey was a comparison between data collected before and after an abrupt change in abortion laws in the United States, resulting from a ruling by the Supreme Court in January 1973. In a highly controversial decision, the court severely limited the ability of state governments to restrict abortions performed during the early stages of pregnancy.

While the number of legal abortions performed in the United States climbed by about 29,000 between 1972 and 1973, according to statistics collected by the federal government, the number of known abortion-related deaths declined from 128 in 1970 to 47 in 1973. Much of that decline, the committee suggests, can be attributed to a drop in the number of illegal abortions.

Although there are no reliable

Abortion survey

statistics on the numbers of illegal abortions being performed, the committee notes that a survey of data from the first year of New York's non-restrictive abortion law suggests that about 70% of the abortions obtained legally would otherwise have been obtained illegally.

The survey provides a wealth of information on the hazards associated with abortions performed at various stages of pregnancy.

- The risks of maternal death as a risk of abortions performed during the first trimester are low—about 1.7 deaths per 100,000 abortions. They are much lower than the risks associated with full-term delivery (14 deaths per 100,000 live vaginal deliveries) or with surgical removal of tonsils and adenoids (5 deaths per 100,000 operations).

- The risks associated with abortions performed during the second trimester are much higher—about 12.2 deaths per 100,000 abortions.

- Those risks, in fact, increase "not only from the first to second trimester, but also by each week of gestation", the committee suggests. At eight weeks or less, the mortality risk is less than 0.5 deaths per 100,000 abortions. Between 9

and 10 weeks, it is 1.7, at 11 to 12 weeks, it increases to 4.2 and by 16 to 20 weeks, it reaches more than 17 deaths per 100,000 abortions.

On the basis of those findings, the committee recommends that "laws, medical practices and educational programs should enable and encourage women who have chosen abortion to obtain it in the first three months of pregnancy".

As for the suggestion that liberalised abortion may become a substitute for contraception, the committee found the data to be limited, but they nevertheless "suggest that the introduction of non-restrictive abortion laws in the U.S. has not lead to any documented decline in demand for contraceptive services".

The committee notes that the 1973 Supreme Court decision has crystallised opposition to abortion in the United States, and that its report is likely to generate considerable controversy. In a classic case of understatement, for example, the committee accepts that since it does not discuss ethical issues or questions concerning the fetus, "this approach implies an ethical position with which some may disagree".

(The report, *Legalized Abortion and the Public Health*, No IoM 75-02, is available from the Institute of Medicine, 2101 Constitution Avenue NW, Washington DC 20418.)

October is generally regarded as the earliest that a bill could reach Ford's desk, but it is more likely to be early next year before Congress completes its deliberations. In that case, with the Presidential election looming in November and a good chance that a Democratic Administration will be elected, it will be difficult to persuade an able scientist to come to Washington for what could be a very short stint as science adviser.

Congress also has a chance to put its own stamp on the arrangement by specifying exactly what it should cover and how extensive it should be. Congress is likely, however, to give the President pretty much what he asks for, and allow him considerable leeway in deciding how the office should operate. For a White House policy office to have any effect, it must establish its own working relationships with other units in the Administration, and most

important, the President must be able to work with it.

The fact that President Ford has acknowledged the need for a central science policy office is generally regarded as a welcome first step, however. As Dr Edward E. David jun., President Nixon's last science adviser, put it last week, "we're making progress, but it's a long road to get to something that will perform a useful function". □

Soviet scene

from Vera Rich

THE President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Mstislav V. Keldysh, has retired at the age of 64, on the grounds of ill-health. Originally a mathematician, whose researches included potential theory, the theory of confluent elliptic equations, and the theory of functions of a complex variable, Keldysh later became associated with the development of the aircraft industry, and his appointment as a Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in 1960 and his promotion to the presidency in 1961 was widely

seen to be directly connected with the expansion of the Soviet space programme under Khrushchev. As President of the Academy, Keldysh was, perhaps inevitably, noted more for his extensive speeches on all possible scientific occasions than for any direct contributions to genuine research. During his presidency he received a number of foreign and Soviet honours, including membership of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the German "Academia Leopoldiana", honorary doctorates from the Universities of Wroclaw, Budapest, and New Delhi, and the Lenin Prize (1967). It has been announced that he is to be succeeded

as President of the Academy by the relatively obscure figure of Academician Vladimir A. Kotelnikov, who has been variously described as an astronomer and a radio-electronics engineer, four years older than his predecessor, although certain unofficial reports from Moscow suggest that this appointment was by no means a foregone conclusion, Academician Vladimir Kirillin, Vice-Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, was at one point a strong favourite for the post.

- The "Patrice Lumumba University for the Friendship of Peoples" in Moscow is preparing to celebrate its fifteenth anniversary. Founded originally