

WHEN a federal court ruled last year that grant proposals submitted to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) should be made public on demand, a number of scientists, alarmed at the possibility that their research ideas could be plagiarised, went scurrying to Congress seeking a bill to override the court's decision. They have not had a very sympathetic hearing on Capitol Hill, however. It now seems that the best they can hope for is that their concern will be investigated by an independent commission.

Several scientific and academic groups, led by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) have been lobbying hard for a provision, designed to preserve the confidentiality of grant applications for at least a year after they have been funded to be attached to a bill extending the programmes of the National Heart and Lung Institute. But last week, the House of Representatives passed the bill with only a mild provision directing the President's Biomedical Research Council—an influential commission which is now examining NIH policies—to look into the matter and report by next May. A Senate subcommittee, chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy, will approve its own version of the heart and lung research bill in the next week or so,

but it is not expected to deal with the confidentiality issue at all.

It therefore seems likely that all the details contained in grant proposals will continue to be made available to anybody who goes to the NIH and asks to see them. Though NIH lawyers have

Science no secret, yet

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interpreted the court's decision narrowly by insisting that it applies only to proposals which have been funded or which are up for renewal, many scientists are concerned that it could open the door to some trouble.

First, there is the problem of possible plagiarism. Grant applications are supposed to describe exactly how the proposed experiments will be carried out. The court ruling would make such details publicly available as soon as the grant is awarded, rather than when the final results are reported, and scientists are therefore concerned that their competitors could obtain complete details of what they are doing, carry out the experiments themselves, and rush into print before the hapless originator of the idea had been able to do so.

The court dismissed such notions, however, by pointing out that it makes

no difference whether or not "biomedical scientists are really a mean-spirited lot who pursue self-interest as ruthlessly as the Barbary pirates did in their own chosen field", because the law—in this case the Freedom of Information Act—clearly applies.

The AAMC is also worried that the court ruling could upset the peer-review process by which grant proposals are evaluated. The association contends that grant applicants will be reluctant to describe their proposed experiments in detail, and funding decisions will therefore be made by peer reviewers on the basis of sketchy information.

But Congress has been reluctant to step in and exempt grant applications from public disclosure for a number of reasons. For one thing, the Freedom of Information Act is an admirable piece of legislation which has ensured that much public information is actually made public, and legislators are therefore anxious not to weaken it. And for another, there has recently been considerable discussion in the United States of the ethics of various experiments on human subjects, and Congress is determined to ensure that details of such experiments are made publicly available so that ethically questionable studies cannot be hidden behind a cloak of secrecy.

he reported that there is no decrease in the number of scientists being trained in the USSR, since the proportion of each discipline in each year's turnout of students is held constant and at present the total student population is increasing.

● The Jubilee Celebrations of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, which, after a postponement of more than a year, finally took place in the first half of October, following a fairly predictable pattern.

Of far more significance was the press conference given by Dr James C. Fletcher of NASA, while in Moscow for the celebrations. As part of the Soviet-US cooperation in Space research, Dr Fletcher revealed, talks were going on to explore the possibility of exchanging ground equipment enabling each partner to monitor the weather and research satellites of the other. In addition, in exchange for data from the American Landsat satellites, which monitor natural resources, the Soviets would provide the USA with similar data from high altitude reconnaissance aircraft, which use similar techniques of spectral analysis to gather geographical data. One interesting sidelight on the proposal is that such an exchange would throw a clearer light on to the Kosmos satellite programme. Since its inception in 1962,

this has been a useful cover-all for miscellaneous objects in space which could not be otherwise explained; not only the inevitable military reconnaissance satellites, but also failed interplanetary probes, unpublished trial runs of new spacecraft and so on. Although many objects have been identified over the years by outside observers, the Soviet space planners have never commented on the identifications, although data gathered by certain named Kosmos satellites are, from time to time, published in the technical literature. If this exchange of equipment goes forward, some new designation of satellites might become necessary. Weather forecasting is already the responsibility of the 'Meteor' series. Perhaps, rather than making certain Kosmos satellites available to the Americans, a new series of geophysical satellites might be inaugurated under another name.

The postponement of the Academy celebrations from May 1974 to October 1975 was itself something of a mystery. The official explanation was that the celebrations would coincide with the Soviet elections; furthermore, that more time was necessary for the preparations at all levels of Soviet scientific society. This second reason was echoed in the press conference given on September 25 by the new President of the

Academy, Vladimir A. Kotel'nikov, who spoke of "all jubilee measures" being now complete. Nevertheless, at the time of the postponement, these excuses were felt to be incomplete. Possibly the illness of the then President of the Academy, Mstislav V. Keldysh, who resigned last May, played its part. A number of observers, however, felt that the postponement might not be unconnected with the whole problem of intellectual and academic freedom in the Soviet Union, and the possible embarrassments which might be caused should visitors from abroad refer to such questions. Whatever the truth of the matter, the three dissident members of the Academy, Andrei D. Sakharov, Igor R. Shafarevich, and Veniamin G. Levich, did receive invitations for the jubilee celebrations, thus forestalling any possible criticisms on their account.

This atmosphere of goodwill was, however, short-lived. Following the announcement that Sakharov was to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, the Tass agency began a campaign of attack directed against both Sakharov and the Peace Prize adjudicators. On October 13, Levich, who had been promised an exit visa for Israel by the end of 1975, was informed that such a visa would not, in fact, be forthcoming. □