

IN BRIEF

Group of Thirteen?

The seven nuclear powers who recently agreed terms extending safeguards against the misuse of exported nuclear technology are expected to be joined in their pact by six more nations, reportedly after Soviet pressure to have more eastern bloc countries admitted. Belgium, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland, Sweden and the Netherlands would participate with Britain, Canada, France, Japan, the USSR, the USA and West Germany in an agreement which allows nuclear trade with states outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The report follows news that France is planning to sell nuclear reactors to Libya, a major

oil producer facing none of the problems of energy shortage.

LST refocus

The US House of Representatives last week took the first step toward rescuing the Large Space Telescope (LST) from acute budgetary failure, by passing a bill which authorises the expenditure of \$3 million on planning and instrument design for the mission. At the same time, however, the Senate Aeronautical and Space Science Committee approved a bill which, in tune with the Ford Administration's own decision for the coming fiscal year, contains no funds at all for the LST. But the LST seems very likely to get

full backing next year.

Shtern support

The case of Dr Mikhail Shtern, the Ukrainian endocrinologist at present serving an 8-year-sentence in a labour camp near Khar'kov, continues to evoke support. On March 24 a petition was published in Paris, signed by 51 Nobel Prize winners, accusing the Soviet government of fabricating charges against him and demanding his release. Ironically, the same day, Dr Shtern, who had made an appeal for clemency on the prompting of the camp authorities that it would be favourably received, was informed that it had, in fact, been rejected.

THE year 1976 is the hundredth anniversary of the passing of the Cruelty to Animals Act, which still controls the way in which painful animal experimentation — "vivisection" — is performed in Britain. There is now considerable pressure to introduce new legislation, partly because of a general feeling that a law made over a hundred years ago must, in some ways, be out of date. Animal experiments have indeed changed during that period. In 1876 only a few hundred experiments were performed each year, and a high proportion involved surgery. Today we make some five million experiments per annum; the majority are to test drugs, pesticides, food additives, cosmetics and other chemicals, and consist of feeding trials which may involve little of the type of "pain" with which the original Act was concerned.

The 1876 Act is unpopular with lawyers, perhaps because it has given rise to so little litigation. It would be cynical to suggest that the lawyers' criticism stems from the fact that so few fees have been earned in this field; their more legitimate complaint is that the absence of decisions by the courts may leave the interpretation of some of the Act's provisions ambiguous. However, the exhaustive deliberations of the Royal Commission set up in 1906, and contained in their report which eventually appeared in 1912, suggested that radical changes were not required. The very thorough report, in 1965, by the Home Office's Departmental Committee on Experiments on Animals (the "Littlewood" report) came roughly to the same conclusion. The Act may not be technically perfect, but it works better than many newer pieces of legislation. Once more there is much to be said for leaving well alone, though the Littlewood proposal for a

more effective Advisory Committee, containing lay members, would seem worth implementing without further delay, notwithstanding the apparent opposition of the Home Office.

In my experience most responsible experimenters have a strong feeling that certain potentially painful experi-

A hundred years on**KENNETH MELLANBY**

ments are seldom if ever justified. This is an ethical judgement, but it may have a scientific basis. Some countries have no regulations to prevent any cruel experiment, and even some states in the USA allow practices outlawed elsewhere. Thus we read of school children inserting electrodes in monkey's brains, and I recently reviewed an American book in which children were instructed how to subject rats and other mammals to noise intensities sufficient to destroy their auditory tissues. It is sometimes argued that the controls imposed by the 1876 Act hold up medical and scientific progress. If this were so, then we would expect striking ad-

vances from the regions where ethical controls do not exist. In fact progress has generally been greatest in the laboratories where controls are most strictly enforced.

Some anti-vivisectionists insist that animals are so different from man that experiments on animals are generally inapplicable to human conditions. It is true that, in the end, new drugs and treatments must be tried out on man himself, but without preliminary animal experiments on several species most physicians would be even more reluctant than at present to make these trials. More experiments on man would probably mean doing more, not fewer, animal experiments. In fact there are already many instances where "human guinea pigs", healthy volunteers, are usefully employed, though in a civilised country, except for the often-gruesome experiments done by some scientists on their own bodies, this type of work has been considerably restricted. It is sometimes suggested that important medical problems could be rapidly solved if humans were used without any ethical constraints. This I doubt. We have the experience gained from experiments on prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Here humanitarian concern was seldom allowed to modify the plans of the scientists, and millions of victims were killed in the name of research. Yet no major discoveries were made. It seems that the brutal scientist is generally a bad scientist, and it matters little whether he works with animals or with man.

If we are to have new legislation, research workers as a whole would welcome it if it only curbed the excesses of the minority of bad and cruel workers, but there is a danger that it might make much productive and valuable work, done under good ethical conditions, impossible.