

## IN BRIEF

**Kissinger on sea law**

Dr Henry Kissinger has urged the United Nations Law of the Sea Conference, now in the middle of its latest session in New York, to reach an early agreement, and has made suggestions to this end. Agreement was near on issues like the 200-mile economic zone and a 12-mile territorial limit, and on the continental shelf and protection of the marine environment; but, he said, the critical issues still to be settled concerned exploitation of deep sea beds, on which the USA's proposals were for an international sea bed resource authority, and arrangements for compulsory and impartial settlement of disputes. There was also the matter of marine research within the 200-mile zone. (The US Senate passed a bill at the end of last month to establish such a zone off

its coasts; it gives fishing priority to Americans and requires foreign vessels to obtain permits.) Dr Kissinger said the various issues were linked: failure to agree on them could eventually lead to war.

**Energy consumption down**

Figures released in the last fortnight confirm that total energy consumption in both the United States and the United Kingdom has been falling, and for essentially the same reasons. Apart from a stimulated interest in energy conservation and the benefits of a comparatively mild winter, the chief factors responsible for the reduction in both countries have been higher energy prices and the industrial recession. The US figures reveal a 2.5% drop last year (4.8% over the last two years),

while Britain experienced a 4.5% fall in the winter months of November, December and January. Oil consumption was down 5% in Europe and 1% in North America last year.

**Middle East nuclear weapons**

A report that Israel has an arsenal of 13 locally-made atomic bombs, decried in the Israeli press as speculation and part of a propaganda campaign by US officials favouring American arms supplies to Arab countries, provoked a response from Egypt's President Sadat last week on his visit to Italy as part of a European tour. He said he did not know if the rumours were true, but warned that Israel would have to face the consequences if it used nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

As money to support scientific research becomes scarce, it is right that we should scrutinise spending on what may possibly be fringe activities. Today a great deal which might go to pay salaries or to buy equipment is spent on organising meetings and conferences, and in paying the travelling and other expenses of those who attend. This can only be right if the scientists who attend these conferences do better research as a result. No one seems to have studied the "cost-effectiveness" of the scientific meeting.

Before the last war most of us seldom expected a grant and we went to conferences in our own countries or abroad at our own expense; if a small sum of money was available, it was received with gratitude and divided among a group of colleagues who gladly made up the balance out of their own pockets. Now most scientists expect the fullest public support, and there is even trade union pressure to insist that all shall receive the maximum government rate for the country visited, even if this is excessive, and even if poorer colleagues are denied a share of their costs. The total sum involved is substantial.

I would not deny that some conferences are fully justified; I think that they can be easily identified. Thus I personally gained a great deal from a Ciba Foundation Guest Meeting convened in January 1966 by Dr T. A. Quilliam of University College, London, on the apparently restricted subject of "The Mole; its adaptation to an underground environment". Some of us, all actively working with this animal, met for two days of

papers and discussions. Most of the work described had not yet been published. Everyone was interested in everything that was said, and all could enter fully into the extended discussions.

**Conferring doubt****KENNETH MELLANBY**

Another equally valuable, though slightly larger meeting was an Advanced Study Institute, sponsored by NATO, and organised by my colleague Dr N. W. Moore at Monks Wood Experimental Station in July 1965. Its subject was "Pesticides in the environment and their effects on wildlife". About 75 scientists, including the majority of those from all parts of the world who were actively researching in this field, met for a fortnight to compare notes. Most of

the papers dealt with unpublished material. Everyone was deeply concerned in the subject and able to contribute something useful to the discussion.

Thus it would appear that small, highly specialised meetings can be successful, and helpful to research. I fear that the same cannot be said for the enormous international gatherings arranged by many learned societies. Here few papers contain anything new. Most of the speakers read a paper as a condition of receiving a grant. Many of those supported by public funds are absent from most of the sessions. Sometimes it is an opportunity for younger scientists to see and hear some of the elderly savants who may already possess legendary reputations, but unfortunately they often discover that their idols have tongues of clay.

It may be admitted that the public sessions of large conferences are unproductive, but it is suggested that the informal contacts, in the bar and elsewhere, justify the expense. I cannot confirm this. I have asked many colleagues whether they can honestly say that such contacts have ever had a major and productive effect on their research. So far no one has given me an example. Contacts between working scientists are undoubtedly important, but large meetings with their social distractions may be the worst places for them to take place. The distractions may be fun, but why should they be enjoyed at the taxpayer's expense? The money could probably be better spent sending young and productive scientists on visits to selected laboratories.