

IN BRIEF

Immunisation clearance

A major hurdle to President Ford's \$130 million nationwide programme of immunisation against swine flu has been removed with the successful passage through Congress of legislation providing for individual claims for damages as a result of inoculations to be filed against the government. Mr Ford last week signed the bill introducing federal liability following threats of withdrawal from vaccine manufacturers themselves unable to arrange cover with private insurance companies. Under the new law injured parties would sue the government which could in turn sue programme officials accused of negligence or malpractice.

Marine conservation moves

Good news and bad for marine conservationists. The bad news came last week

when Britain, having lodged an objection with the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission against continued overfishing of herring in international waters, itself decided to exceed the commission's recently-set catch quotas. Britain had earlier called for a complete ban on North Sea herring fishing, and only the Norwegian Prime Minister has asked his country's fishermen not to exceed existing catch limits when the exclusive economic zone extends to 200 miles.

The good news arrived with agreement between Brazil, Japan, South Africa and the USSR on catch figures for minke and sei whales in southern oceans over the next year. The new shares are based on reduced overall quotas set by the International Whaling Commission during its recent annual meeting in London.

Animal experiment proposals

A memorandum from a Parliamentary committee urging tighter controls over laboratory experiments with animals is now before the UK Home Secretary, Mr Roy Jenkins. The memorandum calls for new legislation more appropriate to modern experimental requirements, a more stringent system of licensing, and an increase in the number of government inspectors. It also urges an enlargement and greater powers for the Home Office Advisory Committee on Animal Experiments, which has met only 7 times in 10 years. The memorandum marks the launching of Animal Welfare Year and coincides with the centenary of the still current Cruelty to Animals Act. Last year saw a 3.3% drop in the number of experiments with living animals in Britain to just over 5.3 million.

PROGRESS in science depends on the communication of the results of research between scientists. There are those who think that the usual channels—the learned journals—do this inefficiently, and who propose novel techniques, but in practice the old methods continue. However, journals can only do their job if scientists submit papers describing their work, and if editors select good papers and reject bad ones.

This selection means that some sort of censorship operates, however much we may dislike the idea. Papers are refused because they are badly presented, or because their scientific content is considered unsatisfactory. Unfortunately many scientists cannot write clearly, and some ignore the instructions about presentation given by the journals to which they submit their work. Editors consider themselves justified in refusing badly written papers, but if the work described is good, they should try to encourage the author to resubmit an acceptable draft. Unfortunately few editors have the time to rewrite a manuscript, and therefore the results of some good work may be lost.

Fortunately for editors, in many university departments or research institutes the writings of junior workers are vetted by their senior colleagues, and this may ensure a proper standard of presentation and content. Generally this system works well, but occasionally the publication of valuable results is unnecessarily delayed by what amounts to internal censorship. There are those who are so obsessed by the bogey of premature publication that they always advise,

or even insist on, delay. At the same time many scientists find writing up their work to be tedious and difficult, and again they delay publication. Research workers who accept public money and then delay or do not publish their results could be con-

Censor judgment**KENNETH MELLANBY**

sidered guilty of fraud to the scientific community.

To judge the scientific merit of papers offered to them, editors usually rely on expert referees. Most referees take their duties responsibly, and make satisfactory assessments. Unfortunately some referees are prejudiced and recommend rejection of results contrary to their preconceptions; editors must be on their guard against this type of censor-

ship. Even with the greatest care, however, mistakes are made, as it may be hard to distinguish originality from idiocy. Outstanding scientists whose work is rejected may console themselves with the knowledge that, if it is good, recognition will not long be delayed. Unfortunately many of the unrecognised geniuses who complain that their work remains unpublished have little of worth to contribute to science.

The most controversial issue is the use of censorship on moral or ethical grounds. Most scientists consider that certain types of cruel animal experiments should be forbidden, and some journals have a policy of refusing to print articles describing such work. Papers describing what are considered to be unethical medical practices are also refused by a number of editors. At first sight this type of censorship seems to be justified, but has an editor the right to assume this "holier than thou" attitude? If the work is of scientific importance, or is likely to advance medicine substantially, has he a right to suppress it in this way?

If a research worker has done something which is illegal, or which contravenes the conditions of a vivisection licence, he should perhaps be warned of the possible consequences of the publicising of such acts. Editors may need to take legal advice regarding their possible liability for publishing such results. But scientific merit must surely remain the criterion by which scientific research and publication is judged. Unethical practices should be prevented, but not by censorship.