IN BRIEF

EEC report

ENERGY, uranium prospecting and the use of weedkillers containing dioxin were topics for questions last week at the European Parliament in Luxembourg. EEC Commissioner, Richard Burke, told the Parliament that the Commission is considering the possibility of including wind energy in the next research programme. The EEC already has plans for building a prototype plant to generate electricity from solar energy and there were suggestions for a comparable unit based on wind energy. However, it was unlikely, according to Burke, that wind energy could be more than peripheral because of the few areas within the EEC where

it would be suitable. Initial results for uranium prospecting in the EEC were reported as encouraging and those for Greenland as good.

There was concern over the use of weedkiller 2,4,5-T, which may contain traces of dioxin, the chemical released around the North Italian town of Seveso following an explosion at a chemical factory. The weedkiller is presently allowed in all EEC countries except Italy, Antonio Giolitti told the Parliament. Limiting its use should be considered following each item of information, he said. The Commission's proposed directive on harmonising safety regulations on dangerous manufacturing industry is to be discussed—

for the third time—by EEC government experts on 13 and 14 October.

Leakey in Europe

To mark the inauguration of its European chapter, the L. S. B. Leakey Foundation has endowed two post-graduate students at St John's College, Cambridge. Named after Dr Louis S. B. Leakey and based in the United States since 1968, the foundation has given more than \$1,000,000 to support the study of man's origins, behaviour and survival. The first task of the new chapter, Dr Bernard Campbell its vice-chairman said last week, will be to raise its own funds mainly to support anthropological research.

A FEW months ago (19 May, page 201) I voiced pessimism about the laetrile movement, but now I am in a more contemplative mood. Eleven State Legislatures have passed measures authorising the sale of laetrile. A most interesting day of reckoning is ahead, because no one, least of all the lawmakers, seems to know what laetrile is. Vials containing the solution are sometimes microbially contaminated. The 'potency' of various samples ranges from 14–87% of claims, and one batch of 'laetrile' capsules was found to consist of dehydrated iced tea, which was probably an improvement, because iced tea, unlike amygdalin ('street laetrile'), does not liberate cyanide in the digestive tract. Dr Gerald Lewis fed experimental animals with laetrile and sweet almonds; the almonds contain beta-glycosidase, which hydrolyzes amygdalin, and the animals died of cyanide poisoning. A child died similarly when she ate her father's laetrile tablets. I pointed this out to a pro-laetrile California state senator, and he told me that aspirin kills, too.

I am somewhat encouraged by the fact that the 'establishment' is finally bestirring itself. The Director of the National Cancer Institute, who opined that Ernst Krebs' theory of laetrile action was a great idea, and he wished it would work, has now departed; the US Surgeon General, Julius Richmond, now says that laetrile is useless and may be dangerous.

The best recent news stories were those concocted by the laetrile proponents at hearings before Senator Edward Kennedy on 12 July. Dr John Richardson, whose licence to practise medicine has been revoked, said that he, Ernst Krebs Jr and Robert Bradford were the victims of a conspiracy

by "the major oil and drug companies, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the American Medical Association, the National Cancer Institute, the American Cancer Institute"; he also suggested that the Rockefeller family was involved. The witnesses, including Bradford, were

Iced tea or laetrile?

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unable to write the formula for laetrile "on a piece of paper", but Bradford, an engineering technician, said that "orthodox medicine was not qualified" to evaluate clinical tests of laetrile. Krebs, who is appealing a six-month jail sentence for violating his probation by selling laetrile, was reported as seeking to leave the impression that he was promoting laetrile for "purely humanitarian reasons". Carol Hehmyer, who prosecuted him, testified that he and his associates in San Francisco took in more than \$500,000 in two years by "selling laetrile and other outlawed medicines".

The 'victimisation' of Richardson, according to newspaper articles, seems to be rendered tolerable by his income (he grossed \$783,000 in 1974) and his opulent lifestyle. Bantam Books have printed 200,000 copies of his new book, *Laetrile Case Histories*. The FDA caustically pointed out in 'The Federal Register', 5 August, that Richardson's book states that he threw out the cases with "the weakest medical histories" and described only 62 out of 4,000 patients! In his book he also tells how he got the idea of laetrile promotion from Ernst Krebs Jr, whose biochemical theories, exposed as fantasies by Professor David Greenberg in 1974, served to convince Andrew McNaughton Jr, a former Canadian test pilot who is the leading entrepreneur of laetrile in Tijuana.

The scientific exposition by Krebs took place, according to McNaughton, in conversation at a chance meeting in a drugstore in Miami some years ago. Such erudite technicalities were not needed to persuade the legislators of 11 states. They responded to chanting crowds who wore T-shirts emblazoned with the words "Laetrile Works, You Bet Your Life". However, a slim majority of the California State Assembly Health and Welfare Committee was unconvinced. They killed the laetrile-legalising bill by a vote of six to five. The bill had passed the corresponding State Senate Committee unanimously. The author of the bill, Mr William Campbell, who for some reason is a member of the senate committee, says he will try again in January. Perhaps a more useful form of legislation would be a constitutional amendment to inhibit state governments from legalising quack remedies.