

news in brief

NASA abandons attempts to rescue Skylab: The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration announced last week that it was abandoning its efforts to prevent Skylab, the 85-ton space station last used by astronauts in 1974, from falling to earth sometime next autumn.

As a result, the vehicle is expected to break up on entering the earth's atmosphere, scattering between 400 and 500 pieces of metal over a path 4,000 miles long. Some of these will probably strike the earth's surface, but according to the agency "the probability of injury or damage is less than that from meteorites."

Initially planned to remain in orbit until 1983, when it could be reached from a standard space shuttle flight, concern about Skylab's fate arose earlier this year when it was realised that the vehicle was slowing down as a result of the extra drag caused by sun-spot activity, and thus beginning to fall back to earth earlier than anticipated.

NASA had hoped that it could maintain Skylab in orbit until a small booster rocket could be sent up on an early space shuttle mission to take it into a higher orbit. However, problems with Skylab's control equipment, as well as development problems with the space shuttle programme, led to NASA's decision—supported by President Carter—to call off the rescue attempt.

Carter expected to boost defence research and cut back biomedical research: A major increase in financial support for military research and development, and a reduction in funding for biomedical research, are expected to be included in the budget request for the financial year 1980 which President Carter will present to Congress on 22 January.

The research and development budget is therefore expected to reflect the main thrusts of the overall budget, with reductions in social welfare programmes in an attempt to keep the budget deficit below \$30 billion, but an increase in defence spending.

It is thought that total funding for military R & D will increase from \$12.6 billion in the current financial year to over \$13.5 billion. Within this figure, about \$3 billion will be allocated to basic research, an increase of 15% over this year, and 7% above the inflation rate.

One administration official is quoted in *Business Week* as saying that "one of the very few certainties about the new budget right now is that basic research and exploratory development money will be downright abundant."

As far as biomedical research is concerned, the Office of Management and Budget is reported to have recommended that the budget of the National Institutes of Health be reduced from its current level of \$3.25 billion to \$3.03 billion. NIH had asked for \$3.22 billion.

Memorial to Birmingham smallpox professor: Birmingham University is to set up a memorial fund to the late Professor Henry Bedson, who committed suicide earlier this year after Janet Parker, a medical photographer, died of smallpox virus which probably came from Bedson's laboratory. Professor Owen Lyndon Wade, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry at Birmingham, proposed the fund, and he hopes that it will provide money for junior staff at the university to travel abroad and undertake research, especially in virology.

In a statement, Professor Wade says that the scholarships would reflect Henry Bedson's care for the underprivileged in the third world. "Henry Bedson was a deeply conscientious man, constantly aware of the humane aspects of his work. His service to the World Health Organisation in the smallpox eradication campaign was outstanding,

both in the laboratory and in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan," he said. All who wish to give support to the fund are asked to send their contributions to the Dean's office at Birmingham University Medical School.

'Refusnik' refused: Viktor Brailovskii (right), who in 1977 succeeded Mark Azbel' as organiser of the Sunday seminar for Jewish refusnik scientists, has now been told by the tax authorities that he can no longer give private lessons in mathematics—his sole source of income since he was dismissed from a senior post as a computer scientist in 1972. The tax department said that Brailovskii could not give such lessons without a teacher's licence. No licence was issued, and Brailovskii could therefore at any time face a prison sentence for "parasitism"—i.e., being without visible approved means of support.



Meanwhile, his mathematician wife Irina (right), has received complete security clearance from the Rector of Moscow University, Anatolii Lukanov. However, although the chief emigration office of the USSR has accepted the fact of her clearance, she was informed that this made no difference and she would still not be permitted to emigrate.



West Germany to build fast breeder reactor: Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's plan to build a fast breeder nuclear reactor at Kalkar, near the Dutch border, has been approved by the Bundestag, West Germany's lower House of Parliament. The plan was approved in a close vote of 230 to 225, but only after six members of the Free Democratic Party, which is in a coalition with the Social Democrats, finally agreed to abstain, after threatening to vote against the project.

The vote was crucial to Chancellor Schmidt because he believes that nuclear power is vital to West Germany's economic future. However, he faces strong opposition among the members of his Social Democratic Party, especially since last year when the Party chose coal as the chief source of energy in the future and called for a six-year moratorium on building nuclear plants.

Upjohn scientists induce bacteria to produce chick albumin: Scientists at the Upjohn Co., the US-based pharmaceutical manufacturer, claim to have used recombinant DNA techniques to induce bacteria to produce chicken albumin, a protein considerably larger and more complex than previous molecules produced in the same way.

Reporting their results in the Proceedings of the *National Academy of Sciences*, the scientists say that by transplanting a particular gene into bacteria, about 1.5 per cent of the bacteria's protein production becomes chicken albumin, and they expect that this level can be increased to 10 per cent.

According to the company, the experiment lays the groundwork for producing medically-useful quantities of enzymes and hormones, such as the use of bacteria to make the human blood-clotting factor missing from the blood of haemophiliacs.