

news in brief

ASTMS branch wins redundancy rights: A local branch of the Association of Scientific Technical and Managerial Staffs has persuaded the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine to withdraw waiver clauses concerning redundancy rights from its fixed term contracts. The school secretary, Mr G. W. Fenn, refused the initial ASTMS request. Negotiations were then referred to the school's joint negotiating committee, composed of three ASTMS representatives and three administration representatives. They also rejected the proposal but after discussion agreed to present the request to the full school council (from which ASTMS representatives are excluded). The council agreed to withdraw the part of the waiver clause requiring employees on fixed term contracts to give up their rights to redundancy pay but have retained the waiver for rights against unfair dismissal. "To maintain happy relations in a small organisation like ours, we felt it was a good thing to do for the employees," said Fenn.

UNEP calls key meeting on Mediterranean pollution: The United Nations Environmental Programme is convening a meeting of the Mediterranean Action Programme from 5-10 February to discuss the activities of the 1979-1980 MAP programme, the location of MAP headquarters and most important, the share out of \$2½ million operating expenses among the 17 member states. Some struggle is expected about the exact terms of the share out but the conference is expected to make slow steady progress towards the eventual goal of a full Mediterranean clean-up. The major problem, towards which the conference will make a small contribution, is land-based pollution—industrial water, domestic sewage, agricultural pesticides and fertilisers—which account for 85% of Mediterranean pollution. The World Health Organisation estimates that it will cost \$5 billion over a period of 10 to 20 years to control pollution at the source, often hundreds of kilometres upstream from the Mediterranean.

US prepares for Skylab re-entry: The US government has set up an interagency group to prepare for possible damage when Skylab re-enters the earth's atmosphere later this year. Dr Robert Frosch, administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, told a Senate panel last week. The State Department, the Department of Defense and the New Federal Emergency Management Agency are working with NASA to set up an international warning system and an assistance team to deal with any damage or injury caused by debris from the 80-ton space station as it re-enters the atmosphere.

Dr Frosch told the Senate subcommittee on space and science: "There are potential options of exerting some influence on what happens to Skylab during its last couple of orbits." But, he said, NASA scientists did not yet know how much control they would have over Skylab's break-up—and in particular whether they could bring it down over an ocean. One critical factor was the power supply, and whether Skylab's solar panels could be kept fully charged. If Skylab could not be reliably brought down into the sea, it might be wise not to try to influence its descent, Dr Frosch suggested, because of the political implication of the US trying to crash the debris into a particular part of the globe.

Sullom Voe oil spill: Census taken by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds after the Shetland Island oil spill, where 1,150 tonnes of heavy bunker fuel oil fouled fifteen miles of coastline has shown the spill to be "locally disastrous" according to Bobby Tulloch, RSPB representative. 2,800 birds from 45 species have been killed. Of the local

eider population of 350 birds, 5 are left, with a similar picture extending to other species. Twenty others have been killed or "badly affected" and it is not clear whether any remain. Local sheep that graze on seaweed deposited along the rocky coast have become polluted with unknown toxic and carcinogenic effects.



Soviet award for Todd: The Lomonosov medals, the highest awards of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, are awarded each year to one Soviet and one foreign scientist. The 1978 awards, announced last week, go to Academician Anatolii P. Aleksandrov, president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, for his work in nuclear physics, and Lord Todd (left), president of the Royal Society, for his work in biology. The linking of the two Presidents in this way is something of an auspicious coincidence. The Royal Society has a long standing scientific exchange programme with the Soviet Academy, dating back to 1956 and the very beginning of the post-Stalin "thaw". The then Dr Alexander Todd helped establish this exchange.

British students swing to science: Statistics from the two major school examination boards in Britain are showing a trend back towards physical sciences at A-level, at the expense of subjects like history and geography. Recovery from the slump in interest of the mid-1970s is particularly apparent in chemistry, where the number of candidates entering the London Schools Examination Board A-level has increased from 14% to 16% in the last four years, while the Joint Matriculation Board's chemistry candidates accounted for 21.3% of total entries, the highest proportion since their comparative statistics began in 1971. Physics and mathematics are following the same trend, with increases of around 1% to 2% over the past two to three years. With a total A-level entry to these boards of 66,000 and 55,000 respectively in 1978, even a small percentage increase indicates a significant swing towards science.

However, Professor L. A. B. Elton of the Institute for Educational Technology, Surrey University, considers the statistics as presented are "too bland for anyone to draw sensible conclusions". They do not distinguish between male and female candidates, for example.

Seasat failure due to technical and management faults:

The failure of the Seasat satellite, which was launched early last year by NASA and which ceased transmitting data in October, was the result of a "massive and progressive" short circuit, due to a "lack of proper attention" by NASA's jet propulsion laboratory and the Lockheed Missile and Space Company to testing of the rocket stage to which the satellite was attached. "As a result, a test was waived without proper approval, important component failures were not reported to project management, and flight controllers were inadequately prepared for their task," said a board of enquiry in a report issued last week.

Seasat was launched to test equipment for gathering data on the world's oceans for both scientific and meteorological purposes. Before the failure occurred the satellite had been transmitting data for 99 days. The report says that the most likely cause was an electrical arc between adjacent slip ring brush assemblies.

Correction: President Carter has requested a budget increase for basic science of 2% above inflation, not 20% as reported on page 252 last week. . . . alas.