US National Institutes of Health

New clinical trials

Washington

Dr James B. Wyngaarden has finally been sworn in as director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the US health research agency, and so has come out of the shadows where he has been hiding, in a sense, since his name surfaced as the Administration's candidate for the post last autumn. He has now begun interviewing candidates for those institutes that have no permanent directors at the moment (some of the posts have been vacant for months).

Last month Wyngaarden also held his first press conference in his new capacity, and the debut produced one serious slip — a statement that his personal belief favoured freedom of individual choice regarding abortion — which was immediately attacked by anti-abortionists, who are very active in Washington these days. He also said, speaking personally, that he would have "no problem" with carrying forward NIH's research in animal *in vitro* fertilization to the human level. Whether NIH should sponsor research on human *in vitro* fertilization has been a controversial subject — so controversial that possible government guidelines have been pending, but not issued, since the time of the Carter Administration.

But when he spoke officially, Wyngaarden indicated his views for the future of NIH — which he has had ample time to work out in the long months of warm-up for the job. He said he wants to keep the present balance of activities, particularly the level of 50 per cent of NIH funding allocated for basic science including investigator-initiated grants. He also favours continuing use of training grants and fellowships as a means of producing good basic biomedical scientists. He said he agreed "fundamentally" with the stabilization programme meant to insulate NIH from budget swings that was introduced by his predecessor, Donald K. Fredrickson. Wyngaarden also defended peer review as a "brilliant creation" of one of his predecessors, James A. Shannon, and said that NIH were not at the moment well placed to embrace more institutes. All this was hardly surprising, given Wyngaarden's background in academic medicine at Duke University School of Medicine.

Wyngaarden did, however, express interest in starting new clinical trials. NIH still run several, but some have come under criticism for being very expensive and sometimes not useful. No new clinical trials have been initiated by NIH since 1978. But Wyngaarden said he was considering suggestions for new clinical trials in the cancer, cardiovascular and arthritis fields that might well be worth starting even though they would commit funds for many years and take money away from investigator-initiated grants. New clinical trials would, of course, mean a change of the balance of activities of NIH. But such a change, if it comes, is some time off, as Wyngaarden has much to do now to get NIH running again. **Deborah Shapley**

Biotechnology

Yugoslav plan

Zagreb

Yugoslavia is planning a major drive in biotechnology, based on a projected new institute on the Dalmatian coast. The new scheme, which now awaits federal approval, has the backing of the government of the Croatian Republic, and is intended both to enhance the international prestige of Yugoslav science and to help the drive to develop science-based industry.

The present stagnation of the Yugoslav economy has made it impossible for science and industry to continue its recent course of dependence on foreign licences and the import of obsolescent technologies. Indeed last year's Congress of Self-Management stressed unequivocally the need for home-grown technology.

Some research institutes embarked on such a course several years ago. Thus the Jozef Stefan physics institute in Ljubljana supplies knowhow to a range of industries from medical technology to nuclear power and the Immunology Institute of the University of Zagreb has become a major earner of hard currency by means of sales of sera and sophisticated pharmaceuticals, including interferon.

The new emphasis on science-based industry, however, accords well with the desire of Yugoslav — and particularly Croatian — biologists to see their country take a lead position in biotechnology. During the academic year 1979–80 a group headed by Dr Marija Alaceivic of the Department of Biotechnology of the University of Zagreb raised the possibility of founding an international institute for molecular genetics somewhere on the Croatian coast.

Several coastal towns were asked to tender for providing a site. Dubrovnik, which already boasts an Inter-University Centre of Postgraduate Studies, was tipped as favourite. Just before the closing date, however, Split made an intriguing counter-proposal. The institute, Split suggested, could be housed in the Villa Dalmatia, one of the residences of the late President Tito. The proposal now only awaits official ratification. Apart from symbolic implications, Split has other advantages including a long-standing academic tradition which, in 1974, culminated in the foundation of a university.

The choice of biotechnology seems to be dictated partly by economic considerations — the costs involved in biotechnology, while not negligible, are modest. Moreover, Yugoslavia has a long tradition in organic chemistry and can boast two Nobel prize winners — Ruzicka and Prelog — in this field.

Supporters of the institute already speak of the projected institute as "international". There is hope that the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) will help but that would mean that Yugoslavia would first have to join EMBO — a proposal already formally made by the Yugoslav scientific community to the federal government. Yugoslav participation in international scientific research has not always been auspicious — although a founding member of CERN, for example, Yugoslavia had to drop out because it could not meet the financial contributions.

According to Professor Ivo Slaus, the chairman of the steering committee for the institute, even if no international support is forthcoming, the Croatian scientific community would still wish the institute to be "international" in the wider sense of the word. The Republic of Croatia has already allotted 15 million dinars (£188,000) for preliminary work and part of this sum will be spent on a conference next year to launch the new institute and to ensure that it does not duplicate the work of existing institutes (such as Szeged in Hungary).

Vera Rich

UK–Argentine cooperation

Shadows of war

The storm clouds over the South Atlantic are casting long shadows over scientific relations between Argentina and the United Kingdom. Scientific collaboration between the two countries had been growing but it now looks as though several promising projects may be blighted. The rumblings have already caused the postponement of the Sixteenth International Symposium on Remote Sensing of Environment, which was to have been held in Buenos Aires this week. Organized jointly by the Environmental Research Institute of Michigan and the Comisión Nacional de Investigaciones Espaciales, the conference was to have heard 200 papers. When the Falklands crisis erupted, many intended participants withdrew their papers and gave notice that they would not attend the symposium.

Scientific collaboration between Britain and Argentina — in the form of joint university projects, exchange visitors and fellowships — has been nurtured over the past few years by the Royal Society and the British Council. The Royal Society and Conicet (its Argentine equivalent) have had a reciprocal agreement for some ten years — 110 scientists a year have been exchanged. All this has now been put on ice. The Royal Society recently sent out a letter to scientists it had planned to sponsor on visits to Argentina saying that, in view of present circumstances, all exchanges should be halted.

The British Council has increasingly encouraged British academics to put out

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