

Soviet psychiatric abuse

Allegations met by red tape

The Soviet All-Union Society of Psychiatrists (AUSP) has adopted a new approach to accusations by human rights groups about the confinement and "treatment" of dissidents in Soviet mental hospitals. Instead of rejecting all such allegations out of hand, it has supplied the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) with details of two alleged cases and has promised information on four more.

The fact that the data appear incomplete, and the extreme slowness with which they have been made available, have evoked considerable suspicion among some members of WPA. Is this a genuine change of heart or simply a delaying tactic on the part of the Soviet Union to forestall moves by several member bodies — including the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the American Psychiatric Association — to have AUSP expelled or suspended from WPA?

This is not the first time that AUSP has professed itself willing to cooperate with WPA over allegations of psychiatric abuse. During the last world congress, in Honolulu in 1977, the Soviet delegate to the general assembly handed round a substantial document containing "confidential" clinical data on twelve dissidents whose cases had frequently been cited as "alleged victims of psychiatric abuse", in the hope of convincing the delegates that the dissidents were in fact suffering from severe psychoses. The Honolulu congress narrowly passed a motion of censure against the Soviet Union, and set up a special review committee to monitor allegations of political use of psychiatry.

AUSP, however, has never acknowledged the competence of this review committee, and the executive committee has had to assume much of the responsibility for investigating allegations involving the Soviet Union. The work of the review committee so far was presented at an executive council meeting in Marrakesh earlier this month in a special report by the secretary general, Professor Peter Exner, which was reportedly condemned by the Soviet observer Professor Marat Vartanyan as being "too negative". For those member societies that have submitted allegations of psychiatric abuse to WPA, follow-up of the original complaint is hindered by what the complainants see as an unreasonable insistence on professional confidentiality.

Whether this strict insistence on professional ethics is a result of Soviet pressure is not clear. Ironically, in many cases, the complaints have been originated by the victims themselves asking to have the diagnoses made public, in order to reveal their dubious medical basis. There are growing fears among member societies of WPA that the executive council's over-

scrupulous stance on confidentiality may unwittingly be going against the interests of other individuals whose cases are under review.

Vera Rich

Romanian emigrants

Cash demands

A decree promulgated earlier this month by the Romanian Council of Ministers seems certain to hamper the movement abroad of Romanian scientists. The decree requires that Romanian emigrants should repay (in hard currency) the costs of their secondary and higher education.

The decree is reminiscent of that in the Soviet Union some ten years ago designed to recover higher education fees from Jews wishing to emigrate to Israel. The Soviet ruling evoked widespread protests abroad, including the imposition of credit restrictions by the United States, and was allowed to lapse less than a year later.

The Romanian decree is likely to attract even more vehement criticism. Already the US State Department has called it a "draconian measure", contrary to the letter and spirit of the Helsinki accords, and has hinted that it could hamper the renewal, next year, of Romania's recently acquired "most favoured nation" status.

The condition that higher education costs, however calculated, should be repaid in hard currency, will be virtually impossible to satisfy. (It is illegal for Romanian citizens to have hard currency in their possession.) The most probable objective of the decree is to clamp down on emigration, a conclusion borne out by the reports from Bonn that the Romanian government has given notice to end the agreement under which up to 10,000 Romanians of German origin are allowed to emigrate each year.

The effects of the new decree, moreover,

EEC research council

Cash injections planned

Brussels

Despite the row over the budget for Super-Sara, the project for investigating what happens when light-water reactors lose coolant (see *Nature* 11 November, p.99), the November meeting of the EEC science ministers approved a near-record number of research programmes. With one or two minor reservations the pilot stage of the Esprit programme on long-range research on information technologies (see *Nature* 3 June, p.352), the 4-year indirect action programme in favour of developing countries, a programme for the development of a translation machine and finally the experimental phase of the project to stimulate the European

are liable to be felt in all countries that have scientific exchange programmes with Romania. The decree, for example, lays down that a scholar allowed to travel to an international conference who fails to return on schedule will be treated as an illegal emigrant, and will be sued for the cost of his or her education both at home (presumably with the confiscation of assets) and in the new country of residence. The relevant clause of the decree is phrased ambiguously, and could be construed to apply retroactively to those who have left the country in recent years, especially since the mid-1970s.

Vera Rich

British Astronomer Royal

Professor F. Graham Smith, now the director of the Nuffield radio-astronomy observatory of the University of Manchester at Jodrell Bank and until earlier this year director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, was this week appointed Astronomer Royal of England. He succeeds Sir Martin Ryle, who resigned the post as from October. One of the ironies of the new appointment is that Sir Martin's appointment as Astronomer Royal was intended to mark a separation of that post from the directorship of the Greenwich Observatory.

Community's scientific and technical potential were all given the green light.

The programme to stimulate science and technology is to last 2 years and will have a budget of 7 million European Currency Units (£3.7 million), an increase of 40 per cent over the amount originally demanded. Before the programme can be implemented, however, the European Parliament must be given time to express an opinion and a formal proposal must be made by the Commission.

The money will be used to test out the Commission's plans to operate a new fund which it can invest rapidly in any projects considered promising without having to resort to the usual cumbersome system of