Scientific publishing

Academic backs down on books

EUROPEAN publishers were last week astounded by the announcement by Academic Press London (APL) that it is to make redundant more than half of its 247-strong workforce. The recent history of APL has been troubled (see *Nature* **303**, 192; 1983) and changes were expected, but the scale of job losses came as a shock to both staff and the publishing community. Most significantly APL is to shut down its book production department entirely, with the loss of some 30 jobs. The new warehouse opposite the company's offices in Camden, North London, opened only a few months ago, will also close. From the middle of 1984 almost all book production and the fulfilment of orders for books will be carried out in the United States. The editorial department in London is largely unscathed, however, and the very profitable journals department is not affected.

APL is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Academic Press in the United States, which in turn is a subsidiary of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (HBJ), a Fortune 500 company with diverse interests. The redundancies in London are part of a large-scale reorganization of the company as a whole, implicit in which is the curtailment of the output of scholarly books because of "very high overheads and price resistance in the marketplace". By contrast, a memorandum of 21 October to senior staff and agents from Mr William Jovanovich, president and chief executive of HBJ, makes clear that "the number of . . . journals can be increased".

While a number of academic publishers have recently experienced difficulties because of steeply rising costs, many of APL's problems have undoubtedly been self-inflicted or imposed by the American parent company. Print-runs, reflecting estimated demand, have in the past been over-optimistic which has resulted in large amounts of stock being written off. And, because of a pricing policy described as "sheer incompetence" by one member of staff, APL had to sell at a very narrow margin books produced by the company in the United States. The decision last year to lease Joel House, in Camden, as a warehouse seems also to have been financially disastrous.

The effects of a reduced output of scholarly books by Academic Press as a whole will not be felt immediately. One long-term possibility is that worthy but unprofitable books will be even less likely to be published, another that scientists will turn increasingly to journals.

Tim Lincoln

Collective phenomena

Absent Soviet friends

Stockholm

THE Sixth International Conference on Collective Phenomena last week cast light on the problem of scientific "refusniks" in the Soviet Union. Although many Western scientists have in the past ten years visited the regular Sunday seminars organized by the refusniks (Jewish scientists denied exit visas but dismissed from their scientific posts), and have participated in the three conferences on collective phenomena which the Soviet authorities have grudgingly allowed to take place, such participation has been more an act of solidarity with oppressed colleagues than a serious scientific effort. (The first and fifth conferences were prevented by *force majeure*.) For last week's conference, the first to be convened outside the Soviet Union, was a serious effort to put the continuing scientific work of refusniks into an academic context.

The Stockholm meeting focused on the continuing work of Jewish scientists in Moscow who for the past decade have been denied what is normally considered the basic prerequisite of scientific research, access to libraries and laboratories. Four refusnik papers were presented, by Viktor Brailovskii, Yakov Al'pert, Aleksandr Lerner and Naum Meiman, supported by papers on related themes by Western colleagues. This "supporting cast" contained such eminent names as Paul Flory (United States) on the configuration of macromolecular chains in condensed phases, Andrew Sessler (United States) on collective motion in free electron lasers and Peter Whittle (Great Britain) on a socio-economic model showing collective effects.

The four refusniks papers were presented by colleagues working in related fields — not an ideal arrangement, since the ensuing discussion raised a number of unanswered questions. Thus Professor Al'pert's mathematical analysis of the absorption of ELF electromagnetic waves in the terrestrial magnetoplasma suggested an unexpectedly large value for the absorption under certain circumstances for which, owing to his limited possibilities for practical work, he provided no physical explanation. And Professor Lerner's paper "on the theory of mass behaviour in developed human communities" arrived without several pages of vital mathematics.

The fact that so many questions were left unanswered is evidence that, in spite of all difficulties, the refusnik scientists continue to do valuable theoretical work. This would seem to justify the exhortation that scientists on official trips to Moscow should continue to try, in spite of increasing difficulties, to visit the refusnik seminars.

Vera Rich

Creationism

Still in evidence in Texas

RELIGIOUS fundamentalists are shifting their efforts to local school boards, having largely failed in the courts and state legislatures to force the teaching of "creation science" in public schools. The current multiplicity of relatively low-key efforts seems, at least in some areas, to be paying off. In Columbus, Ohio, teachers are instructed to approach evolution as a "controversial" subject. In a Virginia county, teachers must preface a discussion of evolution with a reading from *Genesis*. And in the many southern states that select textbooks for statewide use, creationists have forced the elimination of references to evolution in biology texts.

The shift in tactics has come in the wake of some spectacular failures for the creationists in well-publicized court cases, notably the finding by a federal judge last year that an Arkansas law requiring equal treatment of evolution and "creationism" was an unconstitutional violation of the separation of church and state. "It cost Arkansas a bundle of money" to defend the statute, says Wayne Moyer, former executive director of the National Association of Biology Teachers and now a staff

Factor VIII cloning

GENETICS Institute, the Cambridge (Massachusetts) biotechnology corporation, claimed last week important progress towards the production of factor VIII, the blood-clotting agent in which haemophiliacs are deficient. The institute says that it should have been able to clone and express the gene for human factor VIII by next summer and to have a product in clinical trials roughtly two years from now.

Some aspects of the work are being kept confidential for commercial reasons, but Dr Robert Kamen, scientific director at the institute, explained on Monday that the starting point has been the use of monoclonal antibodies for the isolation of fragments of factor VIII from pigs (in collaboration with Dr David Sass of the Mayo Clinic) and the use of microsequenator techniques (by Dr Rodney Hewitt of the institute) to derive partial amino acid sequences and then candidate gene probes. The probes have been used to identify substantial parts of the human gene, which turns out (as expected) to be on the human X-chromosome.

Precisely why Genetics Institute has made its announcement now is not entirely clear. Stock in the corporation is privately held, and there are no immediate plans for a public offering. The factor VIII programme is sustained by a research contract with Baxter Travenol Laboratories.

John Maddox

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