Pharmaceuticals

NIH retreat from controversy

Washington

US RESEARCHERS are querying the cancellation by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) of a major international conference on the use of antibiotics and antibiotic resistance. Plans for the conference were laid five years ago, but pharmaceutical industry executives accused the organizers of spreading "propaganda" and of "obvious pre-judgement" of the issues. Plans for the conference have been repeatedly changed and delayed, and NIH director James Wyngaarden has now decided to substitute a small workshop of conference planners.

The conference, administered by NIH's Fogarty International Center, was finally to have taken place next month. Wyngaarden says his decision to convene instead a small workshop was made exclusively on the basis of a scientific review of conference planning documents by acknowledged experts. But Dr Jerry Avorn of Harvard University, one of the organizers, said the conference documents are "every bit as good as the prevalent high standards of NIH" and that he was "left wondering" if lack of scientific merit was the true reason for the cancellation.

After a preparatory meeting for the conference in September 1984 at which six task forces were organized to prepare working documents, several industry executives wrote to Edward Brandt Jr, then acting assistant secretary for health, protesting that the organizers were biased against industry. The conference would have covered misprescribing and overuse of antibiotics both in humans and in animal feed. M. Marion Jones, president of Beecham Laboratories, said that the conference organizers were simply trying to confirm the beliefs of a number of "activists" present and to secure endorsements of proposals by NIH and the World Health Organization, which was also involved in planning.

Among those present at the meeting were Dr Sidney Wolfe, director of the Public Citizen Health Research Group, Dr Andrew Herxheimer of Charing Cross Hospital (London) and editor of *Drugs and Therapeutics Bulletin*, published by the British Consumers' Association, and Ms D. Melrose of Oxfam, all of whom have expressed concern about misprescribing of antibiotics.

Thomas Christie, vice-president of medical affairs of Wyeth International Ltd, wrote of a "general anti-industry bias" and said that further meetings of one of the task forces would "culminate in an outright attack on free enterprise". Christie asked Brandt to "use the influence of your office to limit this activity".

Wyngaarden says he was alerted to con-

cern about the conference by several individual members of conference planning groups; one, for example, wrote that an international conference would be premature because there are insufficient data. He then had several of the planning documents reviewed by experts (including himself) and four reviewers agreed the conference should be scaled down, although two recommended going ahead. Hopes for a large conference have not been entirely abandoned, however; the workshop next month may lay the groundwork for a large conference later.

Tim Beardsley

Shcharanskii release triggers hopes

Stockholm

THE release from the Soviet Union last week of Anatolii Shcharanskii after nine years in prison for alleged espionage appears to have raised spirits not only in the West but also within the Soviet Union. In Moscow last Saturday, a group of refusniks at a special meeting to mark the 850th anniversary of the birth of the mediaeval scholar Moshe Ben Maimon (Maimonides) issued a statement hoping that "those who have been striving for the simple and natural right to live in Israel will soon be free to do so".

The Maimonides seminar was the biggest gathering of refusniks since 1980. More than 40 people took part, including two visitors from Scandinavia, Dr Jens Larsen of Denmark (who spoke of last year's Niels Bohr celebrations) and Dr Oyvind Gron of Oslo (who spoke on the expanding Universe).

Apart from abstracts of recent work presented by almost 30 refusniks, there was also a poster session which appears to have been stimulated by the efforts made in recent years by scientists in the West who have been seeking means by which refusniks might contribute to international conferences by means of posters displayed *in absentia*.

Ironically, the Moscow seminar almost coincided with a meeting held in London by the Institute of Physics to mark the ninth anniversary of the arrest of Dr Yurii Orlov, now exiled to Yakutia, Siberia. Since the expiry of Orlov's five-year prison sentence, there have been several campaigns to persuade the Soviet authorities to commute internal to external exile.

Last week, the British lawyer John MacDonald announced that he had now written to the Soviet authorities to argue that, since Orlov had now turned sixty (pensionable age in the Soviet Union), he should be allowed to settle in Britain.

Vera Rich

IVF

India embraces test-tubes

New Delhi

ALTHOUGH population control remains India's chief objective in human reproduction technology, *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) is now also officially encouraged as a treatment for infertility. With the first test-tube baby on the way at the Kem hospital in Bombay, more than a hundred infertile couples are being treated at the private clinics springing up in Bombay and Madras as well as at the government-run All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, which has set up an IVF clinic here.

"With so many of our women wanting to go abroad for test-tube babies, we cannot ignore the need for treatment in India", says Dr Kamal Bukshee, the gynaecologist in charge of the All-India clinic. Although India may be oppressed by too many children, physicians are concerned that infertility, which is a significant problem in India, may be exploited by quack sexologists.

One of the British hospitals offering IVF treatment has recently appointed an agent in New Delhi to handle enquiries from Indian patients seeking treatment. According to Dr Bukshee, many of those enquiring are prevented from going abroad by the prohibitive cost. She has herself developed a variation of the standard technique in which ultrasound is used for scanning the ovary and locating ripe eggs, which are then removed by the use of a needle rather than by laparoscopy. She says that treatment can be offered in the outpatients' department of the hospital at a fraction of the cost that patients would have to spend if they went abroad.

In vitro fertilization was first sanctioned three years ago by the Indian Council for Medical Research, which after much hesitation began a programme of research at its Institute for Research in Reproduction (IRR) at Bombay. In collaboration with the Kem hospital, the institute has now perfected the method after trying it out with 25 women with blocked fallopian tubes. The first success was with a 30-year-old janitor who is now four months pregnant. This has so stimulated demand that a computer is now being used to store information about the women on the waiting list, and to choose which should have treatment.

Dr T.C. Amand Kumar, director of IRR, says that even if all the women now seeking treatment were to become pregnant, "there will be no undesirable effect on our population", but that IVF technology will have beneficial effects in medicine as a whole, especially in the treatment of inherited diseases by gene therapy.

K.S. Jayaraman