

Another Doctors' Dilemma

THE progress of the Abortion Act, which came into law a year ago, has illuminated some ungentle aspects of the relationship between the medical profession and the public which it serves. Some 35,000 legal abortions were performed in the first year of the Act, a volume of demand which seems to have surprised even the advocates of the Act. But rejoicing over the women saved from the back street abortionist or the children born unwanted has not been universal among the medical profession. The joint pressures of population growth and future medical advances pose a host of new social and medical dilemmas, of which the Abortion Act and the Family Planning Act are perhaps the first serious tests. They have not been passed with flying colours.

It is no matter for congratulation that there are still regions of Britain where the Abortion Act is not being fully implemented and where women with good grounds for abortion are being denied their legal rights. The British Medical Association has given the lead to those individual doctors who disagree with the wishes of the public and Parliament. In its annual conference held in June last year, after the Abortion Act had become law, the council of the BMA objected to the so-called social clause of the Act as being "completely at variance with medical tradition" and in effect threatened with expulsion any doctor who carried out an abortion on the grounds permitted by the clause (*British Medical Journal*, Suppl., p. 25, July 6, 1968).

Despite the evident fact that an abortion case requires less of a hospital's space and time than a pregnancy and birth, the gynaecologists of the National Health Service are either unable or unwilling to satisfy the demand for abortions. In the first three months of this year, almost half of the 10,000 notified abortions were carried out by private clinics, and the doctors who run them have often been pilloried by their colleagues. It is true that the clinics are not run at a loss, but this is relevant only in that it emphasizes that abortions remain harder to get for the poor than for the rich. It is also true that in a few clinics the standards of medical care and facilities seem to be unwarrantably scrappy, which should not be allowed to conceal the fact that the clinics exist only because the National Health Service is failing to fulfil the legitimate demand. The petulant voices warning that London will become the "abortion capital of the world" discredit only their owners.

Perhaps the sorriest situation the Abortion Act has brought to light is not the attitudes of its opponents but the sexual illiteracy of the British population. A survey by Mr P. L. C. Diggory has disclosed that of 249 women applying for abortion, 30.5 per cent usually

used no contraceptive and 47.8 per cent were not using contraceptives at the time they conceived (*Lancet*, i, 873; 1969). A similar survey by the Birmingham Pregnancy Advisory Service found corresponding proportions of 45.8 per cent and 73.5 per cent among 491 women seeking abortions. Nothing can justify more eloquently the need for the Family Planning Act, or give greater cause for despondency at the foot-dragging pace with which the local health authorities are implementing it. According to a survey conducted by the Family Planning Association in July last year, only thirty-four of the 204 local health authorities in England and Wales were providing the full family planning service empowered by the Act, and thirty-nine had taken no action at all. Some authorities have no doubt been handicapped by lack of funds at a time when money for new services is short, but it also seems that part of the inertia springs from bumbledom: there is nobody to point out that the money spent on family planning will reduce future demands on the services provided by other departments.

Even the fullest implementation of the Act, however, is unlikely to make knowledge of modern contraceptive methods genuinely available to all who need it. This basic human right can probably be met only by deliberate instruction in schools. Here perhaps is a crusade for Mr Edward Short, and one more worthy of a Minister for Education and Science than his advocacy of the Bible. Would not the demographer's slide rule suit him better than the prophet's loin cloth? The demographers' predictions would certainly occasion less alarm if the medical profession among others were to show itself rather more adaptable to change than the section of it which has opposed the Abortion Act.

FOOD ADDITIVES

Who is the Piper?

THE British Industrial and Biological Research Association, which acts for the British food industry as an independent watchdog on the toxicology of food additives and which thus resembles a private Food and Drug Administration, seems to be doing more important work than most research associations in Britain. There is no better evidence of that than the generous financial support the British Government is giving BIBRA, exceptional at a time when the general line with the research associations is a hard one and when the Government is tending to give funds by merit, not just habit. The Ministry of Technology matches every pound that the industry manages to raise with £1.5. But in spite of this great bargain and the invaluable work that BIBRA does for the British food industry, the industry managed to raise a grant earning

income of only £70,661 in 1968. As a result, with current rates of inflation, the association was probably worse off than in 1967 when the grant earning income was £67,780. The food industry, which has a turnover measured in hundreds of millions of pounds, apparently lacks even the commercial commonsense to finance an organization almost exclusively devoted to insuring it from selling products hazardous to health.

BIBRA spends most of its energy on toxicology tests of food additives, colourings and flavourings, and at the end of 1968 had fifty-six evaluation tests in progress. During the year it had also conclusively proved that some of the expensive test procedures demanded by the Government for some classes of compounds give misleading results. Apart from speeding up testing, this discovery has lowered the cost of tests for these compounds from £35,000 to £25,000 each.

The association's work necessarily requires close cooperation with the Ministries of Health, Agriculture and Technology, not to mention the agricultural and medical research councils. The Government provides more than half the association's funds excluding, of course, those paid by individual companies for specific research projects, the results of which are confidential. Unless the industry shows a sudden change of heart, there is a strong case for asking why the Government does not take over the association. The industry would certainly have only itself to blame if the Government were to decide that it was high time that it called the tune as well as paying the piper.

There will inevitably be more toxicological screening necessary as the food industry becomes increasingly sophisticated. Some independent organization will have to do the work, and if the industry is unwilling rather than unable to provide the necessary support, the Government should take the problem out of its hands altogether. As things stand, the industry has an overwhelming majority on all the policy-making committees of the association, but this is much less evident in the balance sheet. The old argument that the food industry has no desire to blacken its name by slowly poisoning its customers would carry more weight if it were more generous.

COMPUTERS

Legalizing Privacy

THE threat to privacy posed by the increasing use of computerized "data banks" to store personal information has alarmed British politicians and lawyers to the point at which they have drafted a Data Surveillance Bill to prevent the misuse of this information. This will make a probably fleeting appearance in the House of Commons on May 6 under the ten minute rule. The Bill is proposed by Kenneth Baker, the Conservative member for Acton and a member of the Parliamentary Civil Liberties Group, and the sponsors hope that it will provoke discussion on the efficacy of legal and technical safeguards against the abuse of computer information and on the extent to which people are prepared to sacrifice privacy for increased administrative efficiency.

Computers have not so much made new inroads on privacy as exaggerated the problems associated with any filing system. The Data Surveillance Bill deals with the first of these by proposing that all data banks

holding personal information (but not police or counter-espionage records) should be registered with the Registrar of Restrictive Practices, that print-outs of stored data should be sent to the individuals concerned (and should state what the information is for, who has a right to see it and who has seen it), and that everyone should have the right to dispute the contents of the print-outs.

The law as it stands seems to cover many aspects of the problem. For publicly owned computer organizations, there is usually some sort of legislation to prevent misuse of information, such as the clause in the Post Office Bill, now before the House of Commons, which says that information held in GPO computers may not be disclosed except as part of officially defined duties or as required by law. Customers of privately owned computer systems are usually protected by their contracts. The law of confidence which prevents information being used against a person who gave it in confidence might be used to prevent the unauthorized transfer of information from one organization to another, although it has not yet been used to prevent one department of an authority from disclosing information to another and it also allows disclosure when this is "in the public interest". The laws of defamation and negligence might also be used as weapons against the abuse of computer information.

Mr Baker's bill is the first attempt in Britain to legislate for a specific threat to privacy. In the United States, a House of Representatives Special Subcommittee on Invasion of Privacy recommended in 1968 that, if a national data bank were set up, the priority of privacy should be asserted and that it should be established under an independent commission. At the beginning of this year, the Johnson Administration decided that, because of the mistrust aroused, Congress should not be asked this year to approve the establishment of a data bank. Britain is farther away from having a central computer bank, although Mr Tony Smythe, General Secretary of the National Council for Civil Liberties, fears that the GPO's National Data Processing Service is an embryonic national data bank. Other plans for major British computer systems include the National Police Computer, which will process police records for the whole country, the earnings-related benefit scheme and the register of blood donors run by the Department of Health and Social Security, the collection of legal taxes by the Inland Revenue, the administration of legal aid, and possibly a computer for all medical records.

GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

No Way to the Top

WITH fewer students unwisely assuming they would find places at the universities, and with more of them as a result applying for teacher training places and industrial jobs (see Table 1), the annual report for 1967-68 from the Durham and Newcastle Universities' Appointments Board is encouraging reading for those who share the views of the Swann Committee. But the appointments board has some mordant comments on the organization and finance of postgraduate vocational training and graduate recruitment in Britain.

In 1968, the output of first degree graduates from British universities rose by between five and six per