

is designed to alter behaviour, is usually distinguished from the treatment of epilepsy and the removal of brain tumours, which, although they may involve the destruction of brain tissue, are performed to combat organic disease.

The debate about the ethical implications of psychosurgery which has been taking place in the US recently has been emotionally loaded, and a set of hearings held by Senator Edward Kennedy last month, as part of his investigation of human experimentation (see *Nature*, **242**, 152; 1973), provided an outlet for many of the arguments on both sides of the fence. A sober and carefully measured appraisal of the situation was, however, given by Dr Bertram Brown, Director of the National Institute of Mental Health.

Brown told the committee that he believes that knowledge of the brain is at present too limited to provide justification for psychosurgery. "My own view", he said, "is that more knowledge and more refined techniques would be needed before one could determine unequivocal clinical indications for psychosurgical intervention". When asked by Kennedy if he believes that psychosurgery is a valid technique for treating behaviour disorders, Brown replied "My answer is a crisp negative".

He went on to say that although the federal government cannot regulate the practice of surgery, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare has published a set of guidelines for any experiments involving human subjects. These embody the principles that the risks to the patient are outweighed by the benefits to him or by the importance of the knowledge to be gained, that the experiment should have been subjected to peer-review and that the patient should be completely informed of the risks and give his consent freely.

In the case being studied by the Detroit court, the project was subjected to two reviews, and Mr L and his parents gave their consent to the operation after being informed of the risks. But a central issue in the court case revolves around the question of whether a person involuntarily detained in a mental institution is in fact in a position to give his consent to treatment freely. That, of course, is an issue in all research involving prisoners of any kind.

NAS

Reorganization Begins

by our Washington Correspondent

THE National Academy of Sciences has begun to implement the scheme for reorganizing its operating arm, the National Research Council, that was agreed at the annual meeting last year

(see *Nature*, **237**, 6; 1972). It was announced last week that an Assembly on Behavioral and Social Sciences and a Commission on Natural Resources have been established, and that two more assemblies and four more councils will be established during the next few months. Dr Robert McCormick Adams, dean of the Division of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, has been appointed as chairman of the Assembly of Behavioral and Social Sciences, and Dr Gordon J. F. MacDonald, of Dartmouth College, who was a member of the Council on Environmental Quality until late last year, will be the first chairman of the Commission on Natural Resources.

Set up by President Wilson in 1916, the National Research Council is the organization responsible for carrying out the studies contracted by the academy, and it is administered by the Council of the National Academy of Sciences. Its reports, which are reviewed by a committee of academy members, thus bear the prestige of the academy, although they are prepared by committees consisting of scientists drawn from the whole scientific community and they do not necessarily include academy members.

Organized at present along divisional lines which roughly correspond to the chief scientific disciplines, the NRC is increasingly being called upon to perform studies which include inputs from several disciplines, and the reorganization is designed to make it more responsive to such demands.

The plan is to set up two more assemblies—concerned with the life sciences and with the physical sciences and mathematics—which, together with the new Division on Behavioral and Social Sciences, will be concerned chiefly with the welfare of their component disciplines. They will, for example, be concerned with the preparation of such reports as the recent survey of physics. In addition, they will provide manpower to serve on committees set up to study problems undertaken by the commissions. Although ultimate authority for the work of the assemblies will rest in the council of the academy, each will be run by an executive committee composed chiefly of academy members.

The commissions, in addition to that on natural resources, will deal with human resources, peace and national security, international scientific affairs, and "technologies in large, complex social systems" such as transportation and urban development. At present, some 8,500 scientists serve on committees of the NRC, and a statement on the new reorganization suggests that steps are being taken to strengthen selection of committee members so that "potential sources of bias—

whether real or apparent—are not permitted to undermine the credibility of the advisory process".

The reorganization plan has been a long time in coming, for it was first proposed by NAS President Philip Handler soon after he took office in 1969. It has, however, been delayed by a dispute between the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering over governance of the NRC. Although the NRC is the operating arm of both academies, only the council of the NAS has formal control over the affairs of the NRC under the terms of its charter. The engineering academy is unhappy about such an arrangement, and from time to time there have been murmurings that it would sever its ties completely with the NAS. At present they are still together, but the arrangements announced last week do not provide for the NAE to have any more voice in the running of the NRC than it has had in the past.

HEALTH RESEARCH

More Polish Accord

by our Washington Correspondent

ANOTHER scientific agreement between the governments of the United States and Poland was signed last week. This time, the agreement concerned health matters—in particular, the sharing of information and the exchange of scientists working chiefly in nine areas of health research. Signed in Washington by Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, and the Polish Minister for Health and Social Welfare, Dr Marian Sliwinski, the agreement supersedes a memorandum of understanding dating from 1962. That memorandum was limited to activities funded with US owned excess foreign currencies derived chiefly from the sale of agricultural products.

The new agreement relates specifically to cooperation in research into cancer, cardiovascular diseases, occupational health, maternal and child health, rehabilitation, neurologic diseases, metabolic and endocrine disturbances, transplantation and nephrology and models of health protection organizations. The United States and Poland signed an agreement last year for cooperation on general scientific research, and the National Science Foundation recently agreed to help finance the building of a centre for the study of astrophysics near Warsaw.