



2 November 1978

Plenty for GMAG to do

LAST week ASTMS, the Association of Scientific Technical and Managerial Staffs, held a one-day meeting to discuss the social and safety implications of genetic engineering. Some of the more scientific aspects of the meeting are reported on the following pages, but an equal amount of time was devoted to the politics of monitoring scientific research, with particular reference to GMAG, the Genetic Manipulation Advisory Group to which the British government has delegated responsibility for giving advice on precautions to be taken in research on recombinant DNA. GMAG is itself an interesting experiment, as the eight working scientists are in a minority on it, and there are four representatives of 'the public interest' and four nominated by the Trades Union Congress, of which ASTMS provides two.

Naturally ASTMS's motives in convening such a meeting were not entirely free of self-interest. As a vigorous, expanding white-collar union it was seeking to impress not just its own members but the world at large with its deep concern over health and safety and warn the nascent biological industry of its intention of going on to the attack in this area. Whether it succeeded is a moot point. The barn-storming talk about 'confrontation situations' and the caricatures of industrial and university management no doubt pleased the ASTMS rank and file who turned out in good numbers, but those research scientists not associated with the union (university teachers, for instance) might well have wondered whether in all the strong words the peculiar needs of universities, and even more of science itself, for freedom of action were in danger of being assigned too much of a back seat. They might also have been somewhat uneasy at what exactly was meant by the talk of trades unions getting more involved in the making of science policy, and this is something which Clive Jenkins, general secretary of the union, would do well to expand on in the near future.

It was illuminating or confusing, depending on one's point of view, that the Birmingham smallpox tragedy was still fresh in everyone's mind. Illuminating to those who believe that the Dangerous Pathogens Advisory Group (DPAG), comprised only of scientific experts, is ripe for reform along GMAG lines, and that the Birmingham case shows only too clearly that scientists cannot be allowed to go on monitoring themselves. Confusing to those who, having come to a meeting, as they thought, on GMAG, felt the question of dangerous pathogens only marginally relevant and one step along the slippery path that ends up with recombinant DNA, germ warfare and test-tube babies all being lumped together in the public's mind. It was also useful to ASTMS, who could connect the passions raised by the Birmingham affair with the more imponderable matters of genetic manipulation.

What of GMAG itself? It is now approaching its second anniversary, and the members of it who spoke, including Sir

Gordon Wolstenholme, its chairman, were clearly proud of how it worked and what it had achieved. It was spoken of as a model for public and union intervention in matters of widespread concern, and one of its members even described it, in the conference's accompanying papers, as having been accomplished "with customary British decorum and discretion . . . a model for all the world". Rightly did several people point to the importance of representative laboratory safety committees as a cornerstone of GMAG's activities. And yet, for all the enthusiasm, there remain question-marks.

One is the problem of industry, which is moving rapidly into genetic engineering. ASTMS failed to get a large representation of industrial directors and managers at the meeting—not for want of trying, the union claimed. One industrialist who did come out and speak, Dr James Combes of Hoechst, made it clear that industry viewed the restrictions on genetic manipulation as oppressive. He would have liked a GMAG that was simply a technical committee (which would inevitably rest on an uneasy separation of facts from value judgments), and he voiced concern over confidentiality and the question of revealing industrial secrets to GMAG. To some of those present, talk of patents and industrial confidentiality was, of course, anathema. And yet, if industrialists, unionists and research scientists cannot enter into a reasoned dialogue over their hopes and needs, the future for the British biological industry will not be rosy. Perhaps this meeting provided a tentative first step.

A second question mark is over GMAG's external relations. Sir Gordon spoke of the strong group loyalty which had emerged amongst members who are, in any case, bound (by having signed the Official Secrets Act) not to reveal details of their work. But this very laudable loyalty can militate against outsiders being allowed to share in GMAG's thinking. Scientists contemplating certain experiments are expected to bring them to GMAG, but problems GMAG itself faces—these are not to be shared.

As it happened there was a case in point at the meeting. All GMAG members knew, and several others present did also, that the thinking behind Dr Sydney Brenner's talk has already been enshrined in a completely new set of draft criteria for risk-assessment to be considered by GMAG in a matter of days. Clearly this meeting was not the place for the new material to be discussed in detail. Yet it is a matter of some surprise that not a single word was said about them. Certainly a committee as large as GMAG leaks, but surely open government is not best done by leaks, however judicious. GMAG is required to issue an annual report. It would be good if it could also be required to hold public meetings, not less frequently than every six months, to talk about the difficulties it faces and to hear views from industry, academe, government laboratories and the unions. The ASTMS meeting was a start. Let it be followed up. □