

correspondence

Smallpox research at Birmingham

SIR,—We took note of your editorial (11 January, page 75) concerning Professor Shooter's report and related aspects of the smallpox case in Birmingham.

It may seem surprising to your readership that, to date, various statements and opinions concerning this report have gone unchallenged by Professor Bedson's colleagues. We, who are members of the Department of Medical Microbiology, should like to record that this does not imply acquiescence or agreement with public statements concerning the report nor indeed, with the content, interpretation and conclusions of the report. The Shooter report is not yet public and there is pending a prosecution from the Health and Safety Executive; on this account, it seemed improper to make public comment.

We think, however, that in certain areas of your editorial the reader is entitled to some factual information. For example, with respect to Dr Mark Darlow's statement that many academics still believe that "what was good enough for Pasteur is good enough for me", we feel that most academics would wish to know which of their fellows supported this contention; and later, with respect to Dr Darlow's comment: "Bedson knew he was backing a lame horse and that it would stumble sooner or later. It stumbled sooner," we should like to enquire what evidence led Dr Darlow to this conclusion and, further, was his conclusion based on personal knowledge of Professor Bedson and his department or on his own interpretation of the report?

It does not seem to accord with the opinion of grant-giving bodies who were supporting the work, nor with that of his academic colleagues in the Department of Medical Microbiology. One minor point—your editorial properly refers to Dr Darlow by his correct professional designation; we feel disappointed that Dr Darlow did not see fit to accord the late Professor Bedson a similar courtesy.

Finally, your extensive editorial, which we felt to be a very reasonable assessment of the Shooter report is, *de facto*, based only on the findings of the report and must, of necessity, depend on the assumption that the report is a correct and reasonable account. In our opinion, it is not a correct and reasonable account, and quite simply is unfair to Professor Bedson and his professional reputation. We hope for the courtesy of your columns at a later date (when the Shooter report is public) to communicate to the academic readership our personal reservations and criticisms.

Yours faithfully,

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Undergraduates more numerate?

SIR,—Joseph Schwartz' interesting article on numeracy in Britain (1 February, page 344) gives obvious cause for thought as to the basis on which one can make any statement concerning supposed changes in numeracy over the years. So far as university entrants are concerned one hears many subjective views expressed, mostly of a pessimistic kind, but seldom are any hard facts adduced in support of these views. In the absence of any long-term research study having been carried out over the last decade or two it is hard to reach any conclusions that would satisfy the stringent requirements of a research publication, but our own experiences with biological sciences students at Leicester may provide a pointer, at least so far as one identifiable group of 18-year-olds is concerned.

In common with many other schools of biological sciences we find it necessary to teach a limited degree of basic algebra and statistics to our entrants, most particularly to those (over half) who have not read A-level mathematics. We have taught such a course to our first years since the inception of the school in 1968 and at least since 1971 the format, content and method of assessment of the course (mostly by computer marked multiple choice tests with questions drawn from a largely unvarying data bank) have remained unchanged. The average A-level attainment of our entrants, and the proportion having A-level maths have also not changed significantly during this period.

Until some three years ago one could safely predict that some 10–15% of our entrants would be almost entirely unable to cope with even the simple course which we give. At the other end, the numbers gaining a very high mark would never exceed 20%, and was often much lower. Each of the last three years, however, has seen a clear improvement over any previous year, either in the numbers failing, the numbers gaining a distinction, or both.

Other than an improvement effected three years ago in the physical arrangements for our problem classes (which could be significant) those of us who lecture in this course are not aware of any change in our teaching technique in the last three years, and indeed with the rise in the proportion of entrants who have taken "modern maths" at school a certain communication problem is beginning to be evident.

These observations clearly cannot be taken as definitive evidence for a rise in numeracy amongst our entrants, even though my subjective judgement would be that our current entrants are much less afraid of numerical work than their predecessors of, say, seven or eight years ago.

They most certainly, however, do not lend any credence to the notion of a decline in numeracy in the group concerned, and in areas such as computing and numerical biology in which we give

rather detailed courses at Leicester, we have good cause for satisfaction with the level of interest and attainment found. It would be interesting to know if other institutions which have admitted students over a number of years and have assessed their numeracy in some way have had similar experiences.

Yours faithfully,

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Scientists should press for Freedom of Information

SIR,—As a public member of the all-party Parliamentary Freedom of Information Campaign (FOIC), I should like to draw the attention of the scientific community to the important private member's bill of Mr Clement Freud MP, called an Official Information Bill, which has been given an unopposed second reading (*Hansard*, Vol 960, No 38, 19 January), and is now in its committee stage.

The main purpose of this measure is to repeal the notorious "catch all" Section 2 of the discredited Official Secrets Act of 1911, and to replace it by a form of Freedom of Information legislation. This latter is broadly in accordance with the obligation of the United Kingdom as a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and with especial reference to Article 10 (freedom of expression) of the Convention. Thus, the Council of Europe (Report No 4195) calls upon "the governments of member states which have not yet done so, to introduce a system of freedom of information, ie access to government files, comprising the right to seek and receive information from government agencies and departments, the right to inspect and correct personal files, the right to privacy and the right to rapid action before the courts in these matters."

On behalf of the FOIC, I therefore urge all members of the scientific community to write to their MPs to support the Official Information Bill during its next stages in Parliament; and to make representations through their unions to similar effect. (Freedom of Information legislation is official TUC policy.)

And finally, I appeal to those members of the scientific community living in countries which have already introduced Freedom of Information into statute law, to impress upon their British colleagues, in their various contacts with them, the importance of such legislation both for the advancement of science (and the public interest) in the United Kingdom and for the broader aims of effective international cooperation.

Yours faithfully,

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Cambridge, UK.