

two drug regulatory reform bills currently under joint consideration in the House of Representatives.

Both bills are intended to speed up the licensing process, one introduced by the Administration, the other drawn up by Senator Edward Kennedy and passed last autumn by the Senate. For example, an arbitration process would be set up for scientific disagreements between the FDA and potential licensees.

Both bills meet the concern of the FDA that, in particular, it should be given greater flexibility in licensing. They propose, for example, that the review procedure should be speeded up for exceptionally important new drugs and that licences should be issued restricting the use of a drug to specified circumstances where general release might be undesirable.

The pharmaceutical companies are, in general, keen on such revisions. Consumer groups are less happy. "Greater licensing flexibility for so-called breakthrough drugs could provide the camel's head under the tent as far as weakening the general protection provided by the drug laws", says Ben Gordon of the Nader-affiliated Health Resources Group.

But the most important factor may prove to be a recent arrival, namely growing congressional enthusiasm for moves to stimulate industrial innovation in the face of declining productivity and increasing foreign competition, Japanese in particular.

The wish to meet this threat may prove the most potent weapon in the regulation reformers' armoury.

David Dickson

Comecon

Links with West

East-West scientific exchange, except at the Academy/Royal Society level, tends to become associated with other, not strictly academic, matters, as no fewer than three events in London during the past fortnight have demonstrated.

The first, a working visit of the Polish Minister of Metallurgy, Franciszek Kaim, resulted in the signing of two contracts between his ministry, on the one hand, and the British Steel Corporation and the British Metallurgical Producers Association respectively on the other. Although these agreements deal mainly with highly specific themes, such as new technologies for producing coke from non-coking coal, and the perennial theme of energy and raw materials saving, Mr Kaim indicated that on the Polish side at least, a great number of institutes and "other organizations which specialize in scientific research" would be involved in working out "ways and means".

At a later stage, Kaim said, there might be joint research between UK and Polish scientists, both in developing new types of steel and in basic metallurgical research.

Environment, too, he stressed, was a subject where there could be "very effective joint cooperation". (This is a sensitive issue for his ministry — only a few days before his visit, workers at the giant Lenin Steel Mills at Nowa Hut had passed a resolution that existing environmental protection measures there were insufficient.)

This was the third such UK-Polish agreement to be signed — one on mining was signed some three years ago, and one on electricity in February 1980. It comes within the framework of the Joint Commission on Trade and Technology (a linkage that arises, at least in part, from the way in which the former UK Ministry of Technology was dismantled). So did the GDR Engineering Week in Britain (2-5 June 1980).

The East Germans, however, are far less happy about the linking of technological exchange with trade, and are constantly pressing for separate international agreements to cover both. Yet for the purpose of the "Week", Dr Gerhard Beil, Secretary of State in the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the GDR, was prepared to waive these demands — the objective, he said, was "to deepen economic, scientific and technological relations".

The mighty instrument firm of VEB Zeiss-Jena makes no distinction of this kind. After a comprehensive lecture on its latest measuring instruments for the metallurgical industry, the Zeiss delegates made it quite clear that there is no distinction between the scientific and industrial instruments produced by Zeiss in the minds of the 4,000 scientists on the staff.

The third event in the past two weeks had, by contrast, little or no commercial application. Bulgaria is at present preparing for next year's celebrations of 1300 years of statehood, and, in the past few years, has been doing some quite remarkable work in molecular biology. As part of the celebrations, therefore, last week, at the Bulgarian Embassy in London, Sir John Kendrew, in recognition of his services to molecular biology, was invested with the Order of the Madara Horseman and, at the same time, made an honorary foreign member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Vera Rich

Biotechnology

Canada stirs

Anxious not to be left behind, the Canadian government is setting up an independent working group to tell whether and how it should promote the growth of biotechnology.

The nine members of the working group are to report back within a year to the Minister of State for Science and Technology, Mr John Roberts, who announced the government's decision on Tuesday at a meeting of the Chemical Institute of

Canada.

The chairman of the group is Dr Maurice Brossard, director of research at the Institut Armand Frappier in Laval, Quebec. Of the remaining eight members, three are from universities and five from industry; others, including government scientists, will be involved as consultants. Although one objective of the working group is to assess the potential of Canada to compete directly with other countries in fields such as the biological production of industrial chemicals and health care products, it is hoped that the group will pay special attention to Canada's characteristic resources and needs — in fields such as energy, mining, food, agriculture and forestry.

Accompanying Mr Roberts's announcement was the publication of a background paper prepared by Dr Louis Slotin, secretary of the committee, listing current Canadian research efforts in biotechnology, broadly defined to include genetic and cellular manipulation, enzyme technology and fermentation techniques.

The report reveals a moderate amount of effort, with total support amounting to about several million dollars a year. But it tends to be thinly spread. The 100 university research workers listed, for example, are distributed among 22 universities; and of the 33 companies indicating an interest in biotechnology research, only ten have more than one or two research workers involved.

To a certain extent Canada makes up in quality what it lacks in quantity. Scientists in the National Research Council's Division of Biological Sciences, for example, are acknowledged to be among the world's leaders in the study of the insulin gene; and several prominent Canadian biologists are already employed as advisers and consultants to US-based biotechnology companies.

The most serious difficulty ahead is a familiar one for Canada — how can an industrial sector largely dominated by foreign-based companies — often with their main research facilities in the United States or elsewhere — be encouraged to support research in Canada and to use what is already being done? There is also a gulf between university research and its potential applications. No Canadian university has a department of applied microbiology, while microbiological research is carried out almost exclusively in medical schools.

A broader issue for the working party will be that of government policy on innovation and whether it should provide direct support for broad-based industrial initiatives — as recommended in Britain's Spinks Report — or instead to follow US strategy with tax incentives and the like.

The inclination of both scientists and industrialists is towards less rather than more government involvement but with a different industrial structure and a smaller supply of individuals prepared to make