CORRESPONDENCE

Medical education

SIR — In the article "Medical schools stay" (*Nature* 6 November, p.6) you say that King's College Hospital Medical School is reprieved. The Flowers Report did not in fact envisage the closure of King's College Hospital Medical School but suggested a fusion with Guy's Hospital, the product to be called the Lister Hospital. This idea has been replaced by a proposal that King's, Guy's and St Thomas's Medical Schools should form a consortium of equal partners under a common management body.

The debate in the University is now centred on the possible closure of the Medical Faculty of King's College London, from which the majority of our pre-clinical students come. The University has set up a subcommittee of its Joint Planning Committee called the Medical Costing Committee which is urgently to review pre-clinical education in London and to report its findings by January 1981. From its report the Senate and Court of London University will be able to make a decision on where medical students will derive their basic scientific training in London.

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Risks at NRPB

SIR — Confidence in nuclear energy (*Nature* 19 June p.521) is not helped when individuals interested in the risks associated with it are inhibited either from expressing their opinions or from performing their work. The uninitiated who read the section on "Quality and integrity of the advisory and control authorities" in the Parker Report of the Windscale Enquiry would probably conclude that the record of the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) was clear in this respect, and moreover that although its late Director of Research, Dr G.W. Dolphin, in his generally censured paper on the Windscale workers, had underestimated radiation risks through a "mistake in methodology", the affair only showed that Dolphin was not infallible.

I have written (*New Scientist* letter, 13 January 1977) about the conditions at NRPB where my paper on radiation risks in the Japanese A-bomb survivors was held up by Dolphin for a year. One reason was his ignorance of statistics but he also objected strongly to risk estimates which were larger than he expected. The increases were not extraordinary but Dolphin's loyalties apparently remained with the Atomic Energy Authority (AEA) for he cautioned against making risk estimates which could be used against the fast breeder reactor. In contrast to the openly expressed bias supporting nuclear energy, there were no discussions about the possible risks from its development.

Before the merger forming the NRPB, the director of the Medical Research Council Radiological Protection Service publicly warned staff, in the presence of the NRPB chairman and director elect, that the new management could not be trusted. Similarly, many of the AEA staff that joined the NRPB strongly distrusted the management who, they said, had abused their power in the AEA and exercised control over staff by, for example, making false reports on their work. However, they took care not to express any criticism in public and warned that it was futile to resist management decisions.

These management practices continued in the NRPB. Members of the staff found that it did not pay to disagree with the management who, in contrast, were apparently free to do as they pleased. When I objected to the management's duplicity and views on risks, the director of research warned that it would do me no good and became intent on making the conditions intolerable even at the expense of the work.

In 1977, soon after the Flowers Report made its criticisms of the NRPB, I wrote to Sir Edward Pochin, a member of the NRPB and an assessor at the Windscale Enquiry, concerning the working conditions at the Board but, although he promised to investigate, I received no reply. Recently my MP made enquiries and in the Board's answer it is claimed that Dolphin was the real author of the NRPB paper, published in my name, on risks in the A-bomb survivors, a statement which is clearly false from Dolphin's Windscale paper.

Evidently the regard shown to NRPB staff employed on similar projects depends primarily on who they are and not on the quality of their results. However, such anomalies do show the standard of the NRPB.

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Reagan a plus?

SIR—It is with a mixture of incomprehension, dismay and disgust that we read David Dickson's assessment of the "plusses and minuses" of the 1980 United States elections (*Nature* 13 November, p.107), where Mr Dickson notes completion of the Clinch River Fast Breeder Reactor and resumed production and stockpiling of chemical warfare agents as expected plusses of the Reagan election. Since when is the development of a questionable technology with very likely adverse ramifications for the environment and for attempts to limit nuclear proliferation a positive direction in which to proceed? Since when is the development of new tools of murder and mayhem a plus for anyone, or does *Nature* — or at least its Washington editor — hold the view that science prospers when humanity is threatened?

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Man's biosphere

SIR — I was sorry to see, in the unsigned editorial on Unesco (*Nature* 6 November, p.2), the passing reference to the Unesco "Man and the Biosphere Programme" as "chiefly valuable as sources of largely empty generalizations". Whoever wrote this editorial must have done so from a position of almost total ignorance of the MAB Programme. A research programme which has been endorsed by 79 countries, with more than 960 field projects, and involving more than 5,000 scientists is no empty generalization.

It is, of course, true that government departments and agencies in this country have shown relatively little interest once they have discovered that there is no "pot of gold" which can be readily tapped, as in the International Biological Programme. Nevertheless, scientists in research council institutes and in British universities have made, and are continuing to make, valuable contributions to the research of Third World countries in Asia, Africa and South America. They and their colleagues in these countries will be surprised, if not angry, at the glib dismissal of one of the most exciting and ambitious environmental research programmes as insignificant.

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Scientific warfare

SIR — R.A. Davis (*Nature* 6 November, p.8) has failed to notice that science and scientists do not exist in a social vacuum. Applications of technology generally raise questions concerning its impact on society and it is irresponsible for scientists to ignore these questions, especially when the technology concerned is to be applied to warfare.

One cannot help but be concerned when the US Army is interested in research directly related to chemical weapons, particularly since the recent go-ahead for the construction of a binary nerve gas plant. The United States is a signatory to several international agreements which specifically prohibit the use of these weapons — weapons which are indiscriminate in their effects upon noncombatants. To suggest that the development of an antidote will render these weapons useless is akin to suggesting that building fallout shelters makes the world safer from nuclear war.

It is incumbent on the participants of a democratic society to call attention to, and question policies which they do not believe serve the common good. When these participants are scientists and the policy concerns science then the pages of *Nature* are indeed the appropriate place to raise the issue.

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