

hands, they will be less than frank with their physicians (or physicians will try to keep important data in their heads). Second, police and government departments, notoriously ignorant of the niceties of psychiatric illness for example, and capable of prejudice (to say the least) about people's sexual history, are likely to use confidential medical data unjustly. Nothing less than the absolute prohibition of disclosure of medical records will suffice.

The practical problems of administration also need more attention than they have been given. The first time round, the British Government's bill was found not to have allowed for the special problems of mailing houses or of employers maintaining payroll records for their employees. Nothing is said in the new version of the bill about educational establishment (but the referees for scientific journals will be glad to know that their identities will not now have to be disclosed when authors demand to see computer records under their names). The international dimensions of the legislation have not been fully worked through, while it is also plain that the bill (like the European convention that has provoked it) cannot have anticipated the technical developments that still lie ahead. This is why the new bill is only a first approximation to a satisfactory piece of legislation. □

Europe's fast reactors

The British Government has thrown its fast reactor future in with Europe — twenty years late.

AFTER two years of indecision, the British Government last week decided to negotiate with its obvious European partners (Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and West Germany) about the future development of fast reactors. So much was announced last week by Mr Peter Walker, the British Secretary of State for Energy. More should be known of what the government has in mind, and of how it has been driven by events to this decision, when the annual report of the UK Atomic Energy Authority is published (on 15 September). The essence of what has happened is, however, already all too plain. Like the dog in the fable which grabbed at the bone beneath the water he was crossing only to find that it was the reflection of the object he was already carrying, the British nuclear establishment has been too greedy.

A quarter of a century ago, when the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) was alive and formally separate from the European Economic Community, cooperation on the development of fast reactors was widely canvassed. In the event, experience showed that Euratom would be an unsuitable sponsor for such a gigantic undertaking, and the attempt to organize some kind of collaborative effort fell to the European Nuclear Energy Agency, an offshoot of OECD (then the Organization for European Cooperation and Development). In the early 1960s, the agency made the case that development would be more expensive than any single member state could reasonably afford. Smaller countries were inclined to listen, but Britain, France, Italy and West Germany preferred to stand alone.

With the passage of time, many of the potential collaborators have taken a minority stake in the French development of the Phénix reactors, but with the understanding that separate development (such as in West Germany) is not prejudiced. Britain has, however, gone its own way, building a technically superb demonstration fast reactor in Scotland, working out the technology of the enriched uranium/plutonium fuel cycle — and then discovering (a year ago) that the economic case for pushing ahead alone could not be sustained.

This is exactly the outcome foreseen more than two decades ago. This is galling even for those who then set their faces against collaboration. Their calculation then was that they were so far "ahead" that collaboration was unnecessary. The moral, now, should be that nothing can be lost by sensible international collaboration at the early stages of huge technological projects. In Europe, at least, the lesson seems to have been learned in the development of thermonuclear fusion technology. Now, governments may be more willing to follow suit in other fields in which they foot most of the bill for technological development. □

Self-defeat for universities

The threat of further budget cuts will frighten British universities. Will it shake them up?

MANY British universities have been supposing that their troubles would be at an end during the academic year beginning a year from now, when the progressive reduction of their budgets decreed two years ago would have worked its way through the system. Last weekend, on the eve of the Prime Minister's seminar (see page 172), they were rudely disillusioned. Sir Keith Joseph, the mercurial Secretary of State for Education and Science, let it be known that the general assumption that university budgets would be stabilized at the level now fixed for 1984–85 could be overtaken by events. In reply to a request from the University Grants Committee for some assurance about future budgets, he acknowledged "some hopes" that budgets would be stabilized from September 1985, but then went on to suggest that universities should also consider how best to plan their futures if their total income from public sources were reduced by a further 5–10 per cent by the end of the decade and perhaps by a further 5 per cent during the 1990s. The Association of University Teachers has quickly cried "foul".

Closer examination will unfortunately show that the universities, and in particular the University Grants Committee, are at least as much to blame. It is now more than a year since the minister wrote to the committee asking, in effect, for its views on the future of the British university system. Breaking with precedent, the minister chose to publish his letter, putting the committee on public notice that he expected a constructive answer. His letter a year ago acknowledged that consultation with the universities would be necessary, and that the development of a long-term strategy would be a time-consuming process. The committee's reply in July this year was, however, couched in such cautious language as to invite an impatient response. The committee's chairman, Sir Edward Parkes, promises a round of consultations with the universities, the submission of advice in parallel with that of other bodies "with an interest in higher education" and a final determination of a strategy by the government. To assist the first part of this process, Sir Edward asks for guidance on the budgets that will be available. He says the committee will need at least a year to decide what it wants to say.

The obvious weakness in this approach is its passivity. The committee, constitutionally the interface between the university system and the government has led with its chin. Although it is itself responsible for having devised the pattern in which different kinds of British universities are being compelled to contract, it fails to use even this occasion to say what its objectives were two years ago, and whether it considers them to be valid still. Nor does it let slip an inkling of its views on the several important issues that have arisen in the past two years — the proper balance between research and teaching in higher education, between the benefits of excellence and of diversity and between educational and vocational objectives and the propriety of increased dependence on external sources of funds. The result is what any reasonably guileful person would expect — Sir Keith Joseph has made the points himself. Let there be more diversity, of institutions and of courses, let money be channelled into the useful activities wherever possible.

The implications of all this are not, however, as serious as they may seem. There is nothing to suggest that Sir Keith Joseph would wish to take on the administration of British universities, or even that he would be able to do the job assisted only by his officials. His stern letter is therefore best read as a roundabout set of guidelines for Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, who succeeds Sir Edward Parkes on 1 October. Even the threat that future budgets are insecure is not as real as it seems. The letter merely says that the government may be looking for a reduced cost of teaching individual students, not quite the same thing as a reduced budget overall. Properly regarded, this is an opportunity as well as a warning. The University Grants Committee should do what it can to make the best of it — and should not wait a year. □