

Warnock committee

UK agonizes on embryo research

GRATUITOUS advice on *in vitro* fertilization seems partly the explanation why the British government has not yet responded to the Warnock committee's proposals on *in vitro* fertilization and related matters. By 7 January, more than a hundred memoranda had been received by the Department of Health, since when both the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the Law Society (which represents lawyers allowed to deal directly with clients) have weighed in with advice.

The government's immediate difficulty is that the House of Commons is due on 15 February to give a second reading (from which approval in principle may follow) to a private member's bill introduced by Mr Enoch Powell, MP. The bill as published would restrict the practice of *in vitro* fertilization to women who had been identified in advance by their physicians, who would have a period of only four months in which to attempt a pregnancy, and would entirely outlaw scientific study of embryos. Ordinarily, the government would have sought to forestall such a bill with legislation of its own (see page 417).

Much of the new torrent of advice seems a reiteration of evidence already given to the Warnock committee, which reported in July last year after eighteen months of study. The Law Society's family law committee has however introduced a novel line of argument, in a memorandum published earlier this week, and has in particular advocated regulations of artificial insemination with donor sperm (AID) which goes further than the Warnock proposals.

Thus the committee argues for measures to avoid what it calls "genetic incest", for which purpose it asks that women who "knowingly and wilfully" are fertilized by the sperm of males to whom marriage would be prohibited should be held guilty of a criminal offence and that, in the same spirit, sperm donors should be identifiable in advance of the marriage of their unknown offspring. Similarly, it raises the question whether children should have access at the age of 18 to information about their genetic parents (as are adopted children under existing law).

On surrogacy, the Law Society would also go further than the Warnock committee by making it a criminal offence not merely to run a surrogacy agency but also to commission, or to provide, a rented womb. On the Warnock recommendation that study of human embryos should be permitted under licence up to 14 days, the Law Society complains that the Warnock report includes no principles by which research might be disallowed.

The lawyers say that "pressure to carry out research for its own sake (i.e. to satisfy curiosity, scientific or otherwise) is likely to become intense" and that the public interest requires that "limits have to be

fixed" before a licensing authority can be set up.

MRC's late response to the Warnock committee is almost at the opposite pole. Its memorandum welcomes the proposal that research should be undertaken only under licence but goes on to argue that because different embryos in different circumstances may develop at different rates, it would be better to define the end-point for study (the Warnock 14-day limit) by the appropriate stage of development.

The council also argues that legislation should not attempt a once-and-for-all

definition, but instead set up a licensing authority that would issue codes of practice that could be amended more easily than legislation proper.

The two documents probably illustrate as clearly as any the government's dilemma. There is evidently strong support in the House of Commons for the proposition, advocated by the Law Society, that it should be for Parliament to differentiate between the allowable and the disallowed. The lawyers say their guiding principle is the "best interests" of the child, regarded as an individual. MRC's case, explaining how research might lead to the understanding of congenital abnormalities, might be held to be in the best interests of children in general. □

European information technology

New Esprit deadline nears

Brussels

FOLLOWING the huge response to the first call for bids for the European Community's Esprit (information technology) programme, the second call for bids, whose deadline is 25 March, promises to be just as popular, but the European Commission's ability to cope with the demand will depend on a clear decision on the 1985 budget being reached before the summer.

A sum of 215 million European Currency Units (ECU; 1 ECU = £0.62) is to be allocated to the information technology research programme in 1985, compared with 180 million ECU 1984. But the rejection of the 1985 budget by the European Parliament last December means that staff recruitment for Esprit's task

force, needed to coordinate companies and researchers, has to be postponed. Commission officials expect that the present project management team's staff quota of 500 will have to be doubled by the end of 1985 and doubled again by 1986 in order to cope effectively.

For the first phase, 104 projects were selected out of 441 submitted for 50 per cent support by the European Commission over a 2-3.5 year period. In precompetitive research, microelectronics figured highest. The 27 contracts selected will receive 21 per cent of the total funds, the 23 office automation research contracts will receive 23 per cent of the funds available, while 30 per cent will go to 19 projects for computer-aided design and manufacture.

The 104 projects selected bring together 334 companies, 107 universities and 97 research institutes. Seventy-five per cent of contracts involve universities and research institutes, 70 per cent involve large companies, and 50 per cent include small and medium-sized companies employing fewer than 500 people.

Only 2 per cent of contracts have gone to non-European multinationals — ITT, IBM, Digital, AT&T and Bell, acting through their European subsidiaries. No Japanese companies applied.

Top participation came from West Germany, followed by France and Britain. General Electric Co. alone is participating in some 20 projects, followed by Plessey (13), ICL (eight) and British Telecom (six), while some British universities will collaborate with European industry on at least two projects each.

Karl-Heinz Narjes, who took over from Etienne Davignon as the new Research and Technology Commissioner in January, told the European Parliament's committee last week that the priority of research and development would now centre on exploiting industrially the results of basic research in Europe. He said he would also push for the creation of a European status for research workers.

Anna Lubinska

IT in Britain

AS well as Esprit, British companies and researchers also have the option of applying to the Alvey programme, which last year awarded £350 million in grants to such collaborative projects. The Information Technology (IT) Skills Shortage Committee, however, set up to discuss the effects of the shortage of manpower on the future of IT in Britain, has concluded that both the education system and private sources of trained manpower "are barely keeping pace with the present demand". The committee recommends that companies take more responsibility for training employees as well as encouraging more government sponsorship of training schemes; it is estimated that demand for technologists and technicians will grow by 5-8 per cent over the next five years. One source of scientists for high technology industries in Britain may come from North America, where a recruitment consultant company's advertising campaign in ten US and Canadian cities resulted in 3,500 replies, mainly from British engineers and scientists. Of these, about 900 are said to be interested in jobs with British industry.

Maxine Clarke