Nobel Follies

Alfred Nobel, whose contribution to peace and science was the invention of dynamite and fulminate-of-mercury detonators, endowed a set of prizes whose distribution seems to send much of the learned world into a flutter every October. An engagingly frank talk about the difficulties of the distribution process was given at the NIH campus on 12 March by Rolf Luft, the Karolinska Institute endocrinologist who was until recently the chairman of the Nobel selection committee for the medicine/physiology award.

Avery, Gibbs, and Michaelis were three scientists who obviously should have got a Nobel Prize but did not, Luft observed. The worst error of commission, in his view, was the award in 1923 to Banting and Macleod for the discovery of insulin. Insulin was discovered by Banting and Best, and Macleod, who was chairman of the department at the University of Toronto, was directly involved in no phase of the discovery. The Nobel committee in faraway Stockholm did realize that there might be some kind of a problem with the nomination before it, and sent its secretary to Toronto to get the truth. "And he got it," says Luft dryly, "—from Macleod." Luft believes the prize should have been split between Banting, Best, and a Rumanian scientist who apparently anticipated both of them.

American Swedish News Exchange

Why no prize for math?

Nobel's directive that the prize should go to discoveries made in the preceding year is something of a dead letter. "The Nobel committees prefer deliberate conservatism to displays of daring," said Luft. That is the scientific committees at least, for the vexatious duty of handing out the recurrently controversial peace prize is the job of the Norwegian parliament. "The rumor was that Nobel gave the Norwegians the responsibility for the peace prize because he hated them so much," Luft remarked.

After his formal address Luft explained why there is no Nobel Prize for mathematics. Apparently Nobel harbored a profound dislike for a Swedish mathematician who almost certainly would have picked up the first such award.—***Nicholas Wade***

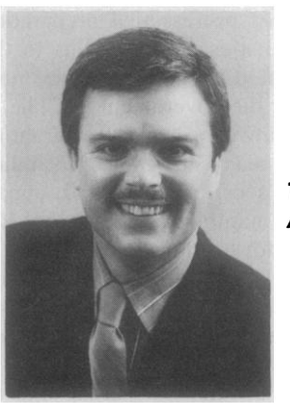
Reagan Selects New OSHA Director

The new director of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is Thorne G. Auchter, a Florida building contractor who was active in state Republican politics. Auchter, 35, replaces Eula Bingham, a toxicologist who shifted the agency's attention from traditional safety rules to regulation of hazardous substances in the workplace. Auchter's selection augurs a shift back in the other direction.

Auchter's familiarity with OSHA stems from his participation on a Florida state commission in 1972 that considered whether the state should assume reponsibility for occupational safety and health activities itself. The commission recommended against it. His familiarity also stems from his involvement in his family's construction business, which has been cited for 42 violations of OSHA rules and paid $1200 in fines. (This is apparently an unremarkable record of violations.)

Auchter says he intends to narrow the agency's criteria for workplace inspections, concentrating on businesses where workers are exposed to large quantities of toxic materials or where the record of lost workdays is extremely bad. A proposal to restrict OSHA inspections raised a considerable controversy in Congress last year.

Auchter has also indicated that he sympathizes with a decision by the Reagan Administration to veto a requirement for labeling of hazardous substances in the workplace. In remarks to a congressional subcommittee, Auchter says the agency will consider alternatives that do not impose "unnecessary and burdensome costs" or "complex and unworkable compliance obligations." He also says the agency will reconsider a regulation imposed last year to require that employers release worker's medical records and details of their exposure to hazardous substances.



Thorne G. Auchter

Auchter, who received a degree in management from Jacksonville University, apparently came to the attention of Administration officials while serving as director of special events for the state Republican Party just before the 1980 election.

—***R. Jeffrey Smith***

Export of Hazardous Goods Raises Congressional Ire

"Mr. Reagan, Sir, you are wrong." That was the sentiment of Michael Barnes (D–Md.), who at a recent hearing of a House foreign affairs subcommittee came down on the Reagan Administration for repealing on 17 February an executive order that restricted the export of hazardous U.S. goods that are banned for sale in the United States. The day before the hearing, Barnes introduced a bill to prohibit such exports. Although invited, Administration witnesses did not show up at the hearing. But Esther Peterson, the former special assistant to President Carter for consumer affairs, did come, and observed that "the label 'Made in America' should be

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