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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taken as a guarantee, not a warning."

The original executive order had been signed by Carter during his final days in office. It was written primarily because of export disasters in which Third World citizens inadvertently became victims of product safety regulation in the United States. For example, when the Consumer Product Safety Commission banned children's sleepware treated with the carcinogenic flame-retardant Tris, U.S. manufacturers instantly made it available in such places as Puerto Rico at cut-rate prices. In all, about 2.4 million garments were shipped abroad.

After Carter signed the order, Lewis A. Engman, president of the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, said it was an "11th-hour act of arrogance. It only results in a loss of American jobs. All the order will accomplish is to ensure that sales go to foreign firms or to those U.S. firms that shift production overseas."

At the recent House hearing, S. Jacob Scherr of the Natural Resources Defense Council said the Carter order had been a "finely-honed scapel" that would have been used to control only the most dangerous products. The Reagan recision, he said, gives "higher priority to short-sighted commercial interests than to the protection of human health and safety and of our nation's reputation as a reliable trading partner."

Not affected by the Reagan recision are existing regulations that call for the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the State Department to notify countries to which hazardous materials are about to be shipped. Scherr, however, said that the Reagan "revocation has sent a message to officials . . . to relax the existing procedures and policies." For years, the ways in which various agencies notify countries have been notoriously variable, some agencies being much more thorough than others.

When he revoked the Carter executive order, Reagan called for the Departments of State and Commerce to jointly review existing mechanisms for dealing with the export of hazardous products, and "to find ways to accomplish the same goals at a lower cost." The results of that review are expected in about 6 months.

—William J. Broad

Solving Louisville's Friday the 13th Explosion

The explosion that ruptured the sewers and wakened the residents of Louisville, Kentucky, early on the morning of Friday 13 February is still something of a mystery, although state officials say they are fairly certain they know what happened. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the source of trouble was a leak of an industrial solvent, hexane, from a local processing plant owned by the Ralston Purina company. One investigation has concluded that the sewers blew up when a car with a hole in its catalytic muffler passed over a manhole and ignited the hexane vapor.

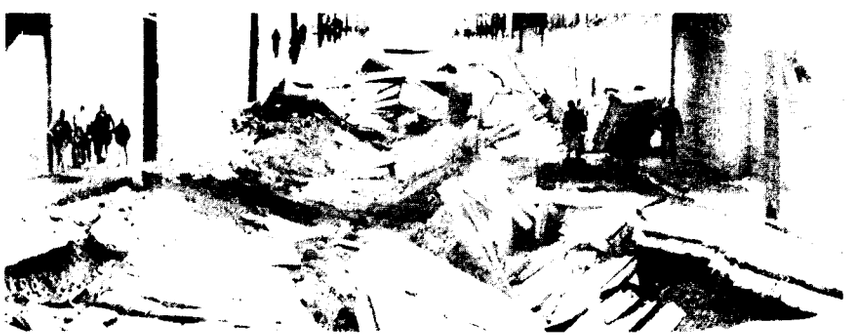
The company has not accepted responsibility, and city officials are saying as little as possible about the blast because they do not want to compromise testimony they expect to give later in court.

State officials in Frankfort, who are less involved in the legal maneuverings, have made an investigation and reached a preliminary finding. According to Assistant Fire Marshall Gilbert Ellis, his office has "proved" that hexane was in the sewers that Friday morning and caused the explosion. He is confident that the source was the Ralston plant, about a mile from the point of ignition, for the company uses hexane to extract oil from soybeans. Local officials began a formal investigation at the Ralston plant 3 weeks later, on 9 March.

A mayor's aide, Alec Van Ryan, says simply, "We lucked out. The explosion came at 5:16 a.m. A few hours later it would have hit the rush hour traffic." As it happened, only four people were injured, none seriously. The city estimates that between 3 and 12 miles of sewers were wrecked and that repairs will cost between $40 and $42 million. Had it rained the week after the explosion, Louisville's public health office notes, the city would have been compelled to evacuate 15,000 people to get them out of the way of a flood of raw sewage.

According to reports in Louisville's newspapers, something clearly was amiss at the Ralston plant the night before the explosion. Workers told the Louisville *Times*, for example, that they were using buckets to bail excess hexane out of the processing system on the night of 12 February, and that the plant had to be shut down at 11:30 p.m. The company called a city sewer official at 1 a.m to check for hexane leaks. He reportedly found nothing.

Ralston Purina has not commented on the details of the accident. A spokesman said last week, "There has been no determination that hexane caused the explosion," and he called the fire marshall's conclusions "speculation."



Wide World

Louisville's streets the morning after

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Washington, this is the largest sewer explosion in recent memory. Akron and Cleveland experienced similar but much smaller explosions when gasoline was dumped down filling-station drains.

Although the EPA has given the city some help in analyzing the accident, the federal government has offered no emergency relief. The White House has turned down Louisville's request to be declared a disaster area, arguing that the city has adequate cash resources to clean up the mess. Exploding sewers, it seems, have become another hazard of city living.

—Eliot Marshall