Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Lords Approve Embryo Research

Research on human embryos up to 14 days old received strong backing from Britain's House of Lords in early February when, in a remarkably large turnout, the Lords voted 234 to 80 to allow the work to continue. What the Lords actually approved was one of two versions of a bill covering in vitro fertilization (IVF) and related research; the other version would have banned all research on human embryos.

At present IVF in Britain is regulated on a voluntary basis. The new legislation provides a mandatory legal framework for controlling the clinics where IVF is done and also research on human embryos, much of which is aimed at improving the sucess of IVF techniques.

Opponents of the measure contended that research on embryos could never cure congenital disorders. Some also raised the "slippery slope" specter, saying the measure would open the way to do research on human embryos older than 14 days.

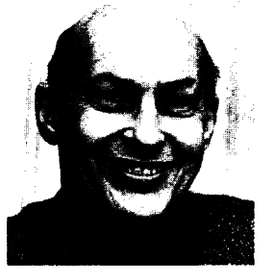
Supporters pointed out that it was through research that in vitro fertilization offers hope to infertile couples and to parents at risk of having a handicapped child; research has improved IVF techniques and extended its benefits, they said.

Baroness Warnock, whose 1983 inquiry into in vitro fertilization formed the basis of the legislation, said "it was a much bigger majority than I expected." The proposals have still to be debated and passed in the House of Commons.

The Next "Nobel"?

Winners of this year's Japan Prize were announced this month. Never heard of it? The Science and Technology Foundation of Japan, which sponsors the prize, would like to change that. In fact, its unabashed goal is parity with the hallowed Nobels.

This year's recipient in the field of the technology of integration is artificial intelligence expert Marvin Minsky of the



MIT Photo by Donna Coveney

Marvin Minsky

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who will get his award—and an audience with the emperor—in Tokyo in April.

In this year's other category, earth science, the prize is split among three men honored for their role in the plate tectonics revolution: Jason Morgan of Princeton University, Dan McKenzie of Cambridge University, and Xavier Le Pichon of the College de France in Paris.

The Japan Prize, now 6 years old, is awarded in two fields each year. And if money is the main criterion, they are already on a par with the Nobels. This year's awards were worth 50 million yen ($345,000) apiece.

The Nobel and Japan prizes share one other characteristic: they don't usually go to Japanese. So far, of 17 winners, 11 were Americans and one was Japanese. Only five Japanese scientists have won Nobels.

NRC Weighs in on Precollege Math

A new report from the National Research Council's Mathematical Sciences Education Board calls calculators and computers the factors with the greatest potential impact on mathematics education—and lashes out at educators who resist their use.

The report's recommendations include the usual calls for more relevance, more participatory learning, more emphasis on concepts as opposed to rote learning, new textbooks, and more teacher education.

But "of all the influences that shape mathematics education," it says, "technology stands out as the one with greatest potential for revolutionary impact."

According to the report, some mathematicians and teachers oppose use of calculators and computers. Calculators, these folks say, are an "inappropriate technical crutch"; the time spent learning to use computer programs detracts from learning basic math skills.

Dead wrong, the committee says. Technologies vastly expand the range of problems that can be addressed by students, they save teachers' time, and they render accessible sophisticated concepts that otherwise might never be touched on. All mathematics classrooms should have computers, and "calculators should be used in school mathematics from kindergarten on."

At the same time, says the committee, there is a need to reduce the time spent on teaching "traditional arithmetic skills," which "no longer serve a compelling purpose." That would leave more time for developing "higher order thinking skills" and allow students of uneven ability to find something they're good at rather than getting bogged down in the basics.

Yeast Lib

Liberation movements have a way of creating an environment that isn't exactly conducive to humor. But an exception is reported by the UC Berkeley's Coalition for Animals and Animal Research.

The Prince and the Forests

Calling us the "last generation that can save the rain forest from total destruction," Britain's Prince Charles has called for an international convention to preserve and protect tropical forests. The prince made his proposal at a recent lecture sponsored by the Friends of the Earth Trust and the Kew Gardens in London. In the same lecture he called for a boycott of tropical timber.

R. Mittermeier

Yanomamo. *Amazon native.*

The convention Charles has in mind would develop a rational basis for sustainable use of forests that would protect biodiversity and preserve the rights of human inhabitants. It would also set targets for reduction of carbon dioxide emissions and devise new funding mechanisms for forest preservation.

Charles stressed the importance of involving rain forest dwellers and their knowledge about the environment in any conservation efforts. He said he found it "disturbing" that the International Tropical Timber Organization has ignored the "rights and needs of indigenous forest dwellers."

Asked what ordinary people could do to save rain forests, Charles advised a consumer boycott on all tropical timber, noting that there is no way to ascertain which timber has been sustainably harvested. The recommendation has drawn heavy fire from the British Timber Trade Federation, which says a boycott would hasten destruction by reducing the value of the forests to the producer nations.