

Facing the health crisis

The sound and fury that has marked recent meetings of the American Medical Association was missing this time around when organized medicine's governing body assembled in Boston last week. Nevertheless, fearing disruptions similar to those that plagued two previous meetings (SN: 7/26/69, p. 76; SN: 7/4, p. 8), the House of Delegates saw fit to make one of its first orders of business a rule that should any disruptions occur, the House would simply adjourn forthwith.

As it turned out, however, the only cause for immediate recess came from within, late in the day when resolutions regarding the doctors' position on abortion came before the House, whose members represent the medical societies of each state. An impassioned speech by Dr. Joseph P. Donnelly, a New Jersey delegate well known to his colleagues as an adamant foe of liberalized abortion policies, was followed by a motion to limit debate and then a series of tricky parliamentary maneuvers that led to such confusion that only a simple motion to recess could win passage.

By morning, however, the doctors had calmed down considerably and voted with relative dispatch to approve an abortion policy. It says in essence that abortion is a medical procedure like any other, to be performed only in a hospital by a qualified physician with the consent of two of his colleagues. It adds that no doctor or other hospital employe should be required to participate in an abortion if it is contrary to his moral principles.

Thus, the AMA reaffirmed a stand it took at its session in Chicago in June and stood with the decision made at that time to abandon its previous policy of opposition to abortion except when indicated by serious medical conditions.

Altogether, during the three-day session, the House of Delegates considered some 72 resolutions and a dozen reports of the board of trustees ranging from items of wide-ranging importance to matters of internal house-keeping, such as whether it should accept an invitation from the Hawaiian delegation to hold its 1975 clinical convention in Honolulu. The House voted yes on that.

Among the more pressing issues, the question of peer review and its role as a mechanism in aiding efforts to control both the quality and cost of health care came in for much debate.

Practicing physicians are renowned for their antipathy to any move by the Federal Government to interfere with medical affairs. Nevertheless, largely as a result of recent Senate Finance



Photos: AMA

AMA House of Delegates: Abortion is a matter between doctor and patient.

Committee investigations into physician abuse of Medicare-Medicaid funds (SN: 2/14, p. 170) and of broad Congressional concern over rising health costs, there are moves to set up bodies to oversee certain aspects of medical practice, including limitations on physicians' fees.

One such step is embodied in an amendment Sen. Wallace Bennett (R-Utah) has introduced to the Medicare-Medicaid bill. The Bennett amendment would establish professional standards review organizations, allowing state or county medical societies first crack at establishing these review bodies in various regions but prohibiting them from exerting total control over their activities. Thus, medical professionals not included in county medical societies would have to be included on PSRO boards. The AMA, by contrast, maintains its view that it should bear sole responsibility for policing the profession through its own peer review organizations.

Legislation pending before Congress relating to these matters is generally



Dr. Bornemeier: Federal subsidy.

agreed to be likely to win passage, but whether Congress will get to it this session is uncertain. Indeed, the final language of the Bennett amendment has yet to be written and one AMA delegate urged his colleagues to be cautious in any pronouncements they might make on the subject.

Said Dr. C. Willard Camalier of Washington, D.C., "I have lived and practiced long enough in Washington to see how power is handled effectively. One of the lessons is that enunciation of a strict policy during negotiations is not always wisest, even though such a policy clearly exists." In short, don't antagonize the Senate Finance Committee more than necessary.

In another matter involving the relationship between medicine and government, AMA president Walter C. Bornemeier, in his opening address, called for a change in AMA policy when he urged that young doctors be allowed to seek Federal aid in establishing group practices in deprived and ghetto areas. Citing the right of the poor to good health care and deploring the trend of hospitals, government and social service agencies "who even now vie for control (of ghetto medical facilities)," Dr. Bornemeier said it would be preferable to keep such activity in the hands of private practice even if that means accepting a certain degree of Federal support. His proposal, which does not carry the weight of official AMA policy, was referred to the trustees for further consideration.

Among other issues before the House of Delegates were:

- Malpractice insurance. Acknowledging that efforts to establish, through the AMA, a nationwide malpractice insurance system have failed, delegates agreed to push for programs on a state-by-state basis.

- Liability for blood. A recent court decision in Illinois which held that hos-

pital and physician are liable if a patient contracts hepatitis from virus-contaminated blood transfusions (SN: 10/24, p. 337) was, expectedly, viewed with alarm. The House resolved to seek state legislation protecting medical personnel from liability except in cases in which negligence could be proved.

■ **AMA membership.** Procedures for admitting interns and residents to AMA membership were approved.

■ **Federal Department of Health.** The House of Delegates adopted a resolution reaffirming its intent to push for such an independent department to be headed by a physician who would have Cabinet rank. □

CLOUD SEEDING

Snowfall, ecology and man

Within the next few weeks, the Bureau of Reclamation expects to begin seeding clouds over the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado, marking the formal beginning of the four-year Colorado River Basin Pilot Project. The final instrumentation check took place on Dec. 9 and now the project need only await the appearance of a suitable cloud.

The purpose of the project is to determine the feasibility of increasing the water flow from the Rocky Mountains by seeding winter snow clouds to augment the snowpack.

However, partly because very little is known about ecological consequences of weather modification, the project has aroused considerable local concern (SN: 5/9, p. 461).

To help answer some of the questions that have been raised, the Department of the Interior has tacked a new phase onto the project—an intensive study of the ecological effects of induced increases in snowpack and precipitation.

The four-year, \$881,000 ecological study will be conducted by the University of Colorado, Colorado State University and Fort Lewis College. Thirteen interrelated studies are planned.

Scientists will examine the effect of increased snowfall on the animals—big and little—that inhabit the region, including elk, marmots, shrews, squirrels, chipmunks and rabbits. Studies of the elk will pay particular attention to changes in grazing habits. A trap and tag program will help researchers keep track of the smaller mammals.

But one animal, the lowly toad, will receive particular scrutiny. Of all the animal populations in the San Juan Mountain area, toads are the most sensitive to snow cover changes. Shifts in these amphibian populations could, therefore, provide early warning of other, slower changes elsewhere in the ecosystem.

Other studies will examine the effect of increased snowfall on the alpine plants that form the diet of some of the animals. Researchers will also make repeated inventories of varieties, numbers and densities of various species of forest vegetation to discover changes in plant population or character. A separate study will look at effects of added precipitation on the growth of principal species of forest trees.

In attempts to reconstruct the climatic history of the area, researchers will examine tree rings, weather records, mine camp journals and old newspapers. No formal weather record for the area exists, but records from one weather station on the front range of the Colorado Rockies indicate that the mean air temperature for the summer months of 1953 to 1969 has declined by 2.9 degrees F., with a corresponding increase in snowfall.

This poses a problem for the researchers. If the San Juan Mountains are already undergoing natural ecological changes, it may be difficult to differentiate the effects of the cloud seeding project from natural changes. The researchers hope that by reconstructing a climatic-ecological record for the area over the past several hundred years, they will find some way to make this distinction.

To study the effects of increased snowfall on the relation between climate and plant growth, scientists will tap selected trees with small devices that can record the pulse of life in the trees. The device, known as a dendrometer, responds to the pressure of sap as it rises and falls in the trunk of the tree, and is so sensitive that it can detect the instant that growth begins in the tree and the instant it stops.

The seeding agent to be used in the project, silver iodide, may itself become a factor in ecological change, as vegetation on which it is deposited from the snowfalls is consumed by animals. Accordingly, a separate study will be made of the accumulation and toxicity of silver.

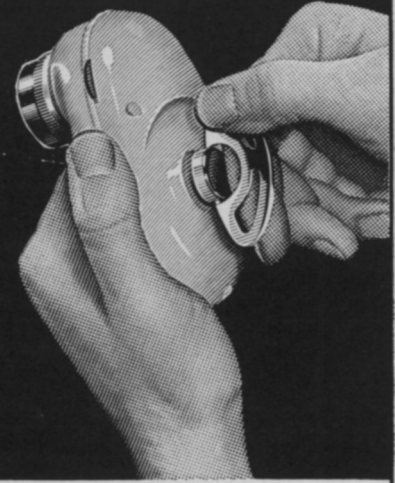
Finally, scientists will conduct a general ecological overview of the region and study the impact of weather modification on alpine geomorphic processes.

The Bureau of Reclamation stresses that the project does not encompass all of the important issues that might be considered, but it believes the major questions about effects will be answerable.

Project coordinator Dr. H. L. Teller of Colorado State University points out that one of the study's purposes is to evolve a methodology for future studies of this nature.

"Right now we're groping," he says. "This is the first large-scale study of the ecological impact of weather modification." □

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