

The new bill introduced by Rep. Don Fuqua (D-Fla.) would establish a National Medical Devices Standards Commission composed of 20 members appointed by the President. There would be four representatives from private industry engaged in the manufacture of medical devices, four from universities and/or private laboratories engaged in research on medical devices, four from the private practice of medicine, four from other Government agencies dealing with public health, medical research and food and drug control, and four members of Congress, two from each house, representing both parties.

This commission would review present standards and quality controls used in the manufacturing and distribution of medical devices, surgical instruments, artificial organs and limbs, therapeutic instruments and devices, and other medical and hospital equipment.

It is not all the control FDA has sought in the past, but the agency would accept it as a start. ◇

CHANGING SPOTS

Hickel backs strong pollution bill

Walter J. Hickel didn't come into his job as Secretary of Interior on a tidal wave of acclaim.

There was a howl almost of disbelief when the former Alaskan Governor was nominated by President Nixon. In recent years conservationists and outdoorsmen have come to think of the Interior Department as their home in Washington. The department is, in fact, that branch of the Federal Government most directly concerned with both the protection and exploitation of the environment.

In light of this, Hickel's background as the development-oriented governor of the frontier state of Alaska was understandably controversial (SN: 2/1, p. 110). His nomination was opposed without hesitation by the Sierra Club and other conservation groups, and he was the only cabinet designee whose nomination met challenge in Congress.

Sen. Edmund S. Muskie (D-Maine) was one of those who seriously questioned Hickel's broadness of view and other qualifications for the job. But last week, following the secretary's testimony before the Senator's air and water pollution subcommittee, Muskie was saying that Hickel's attitude on pollution is "positive and constructive. . . . I am delighted."

Perhaps stung by repeated accusations that he would be soft on industrial pollution, Hickel cracked down hard on oil companies after a runaway offshore well near Santa Barbara blackened the California coast (SN: 3/1, p. 208). He issued an order holding oil compa-

nies responsible for any pollution from wells drilled on the continental shelf beyond the three-mile limit. The responsibility would be unlimited and negligence would not be a factor.

The pollution subcommittee chaired by Muskie currently is holding hearings on a bill which is a substitute for a Muskie proposal passed last year by the Senate but rejected by the House. Hickel's crackdown order embodies many of the features of the tougher, rejected bill.

"I have a personal commitment to preserve and enhance the nation's water quality," Hickel declared before the subcommittee. "I am convinced that with proper administration, adequate financing, and good, tough enforcement the objectives as outlined by Congress (in the Water Quality Act of 1965) can be attained."

Turning to Muskie's bill, he said he endorses it in general but "we believe that it should be strengthened in several major respects."

The principal point at which he would strengthen it is expanding it to include other hazardous substances, in addition to oil, which a firm might be compelled to clean up. He would like it to cover installations such as oil drilling rigs as well as vessels when these are located over the outer continental shelf. And he would like it made plain that there is a prima facie case for liability in the event of a discharge, so that the burden of proof of negligence is not on the government.

"Secretary Hickel's strong and unqualified endorsement of the water quality improvement acts is heartening," Muskie said last week. Noting that the Senate passed the similar bill last year that was rejected by the House, Muskie added, "I hope that the secretary now will press his views in the House as strongly as he has in the Senate."

Sen. William B. Spong Jr. (D-Va.), a member of the subcommittee and a co-sponsor of the bill, said he is pleased by Hickel's testimony.

Despite the official pleasure, there is a good measure of doubt among some Senators who don't believe anyone can that completely change spots, at least not so quickly. Somewhat cynically, they point out that Muskie, burned in the House on a stronger bill last year, already has as tough a bill as he thinks will go through. Thus he is unlikely to embody the secretary's proposals for strengthening it, so Hickel had little to lose by making such proposals.

Members of the subcommittee, at the same time, are disturbed that the Geological Survey has gone unscathed by Hickel after the Santa Barbara oil disaster, even though, they feel, the agency acted throughout as an arm of the oil industry.

DRUGS

Unpredictable dosages

It is widely assumed that the recommended or prescribed dose of a particular drug allows for a large margin of safety before the overdose level is reached. Most people at one time or another have exceeded what they know is the correct dose in order to obtain relief a little faster, or because they can't remember having taken their pill.

In fact, depending on the drug and on the individual's susceptibility to it, even far less than the recommended dose can be an overdose. The whole idea of a drug dose which will produce a predictable result in anyone who takes it is a myth (SN: 6/29, p. 614).

The latest in a series of surveys showing adverse drug effects from Ireland turned up:

- A man who took a five-milligram tablet of an anticoagulant because he had run out of the three-milligram tablets prescribed; he found himself in the hospital a few days later with nose-bleed and vomiting of blood.

- A woman with bronchial asthma who was admitted to the hospital with heart palpitations after she had used, contrary to instructions, an isoprenaline spray repeatedly for several hours.

- An asthmatic, a 29-year-old man who had been taking 50 percent more than his prescribed dose of methylprednisolone to obtain relief from wheezing. He came to the hospital with changed personality, considerable weight gain from fluid retention and other effects.

In the past five years at least nine surveys have been made in this country, Canada and North Ireland to discover the incidence of adverse drug reactions.

In the latest survey, Drs. O. L. Wade and Natalie Hurwitz, both of the Queen's University of Belfast, found adverse reactions in persons who had taken digitalis preparations, antibiotics, pain killers, corticosteroids and anticoagulants in their survey of 1,268 patients. They studied these reactions in two hospital wards, one in the Belfast City Hospital, a general hospital and in an institution for the mentally ill.

Adverse drug reactions in this survey totalled 118, they report in the March 1 BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL. In a previous study at Grace New Haven Community Hospital, by Yale University over eight months, 103 patients developed reactions out of a total of 1,814. The largest number of reactions was 772 at Philadelphia hospitals, where 86,100 patients were studied over a period of two years. Johns Hopkins reported 97 adverse reactions in a study of 714 persons, and Mary Fletcher Hospital in Burlington, Vt., had 98 reactions out of 9,557 patients studied. ◇