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Key Technicians

SIR,—Strike action by hospital medical physics and physiological measurement technicians in support of their wage claim has attracted considerable publicity. The intrusion of this weapon into medicine may appear distasteful, but a group of responsible and highly skilled people are involved. They are key individuals in the more complex fields of medicine, not only in diagnosis but also in treatment with life-support such as heart-lung and kidney machines and in these situations they are directly responsible for the lives of their patients.

Despite their increasing responsibility for patient care they remain an unvoiced group whose small size may perhaps account for the rebuffs which they have received during

three years of negotiation with the Department of Health and Social Security via the Whitley Council. As their medical colleagues we wish to support their claim. The average wage of £20 per week granted to these key members of the National Health Service contrasts strangely with the earning capacity of industrial workers of lesser skills and no clinical responsibility.—We are, etc.,

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Referees and Rejects

SIR,—Dr. D. F. Horrobin's shotgun brings down a few birds (mostly the stuffed ones) (27 April, p. 216) though his reference to Karl Popper's philosophical best-seller as "largely unread" makes me wonder what sort of company he keeps. I am a full-time professional research worker, a part-time, practically professional, research-grant applicant, an evening referee, a weekend scientific journal editor, and a between-time research administrator. I have therefore plenty of experience of both ends of the gun.

I write, however, as the Honorary Secretary of the Mental Health Trust and Research Fund, a small grant-giving body by international standards but a very well known one to those of your readers engaged in research bearing on psychiatric topics, from neuroendocrinology to social structure.

We use, indeed, anonymous referees in assessing applications, but we make a practice of passing on referees' comments which raise questions or are critical of experimental design to the applicant, anonymously. The applicant is invited to reply to the criticisms and his reply is circulated to our research committee together with his original application, the referee's report and the referee's brief assessment of the applicant's reply (that is, has he removed the doubts or further deepened them?). We do not find that referees object to this procedure, and applicants seem to welcome it. It frequently leads to better designed projects.

It may to some extent also meet Dr. Horrobin's contention that it is desirable to tell applicants why their application has been rejected. When I first took a few hours a

week off from being a research worker to play administrator I naturally started by telling rejected applicants what was wrong with their applications. Such readers as have told writers what is wrong with their stories, artists what is wrong with their pictures, and actors what is wrong with their performance will laugh at my ingenuousness. A small number of scientists (do we call them humble, objective, broken, or wise?) listened carefully (there was a flood of telephone calls) and evidently took note for next time. But the majority showed a tendency to engage in endless self-justifying correspondence. We do tell an applicant if his project was rejected for reasons of policy (for example, near enough to our field, etc.); in M.H.T.&R.F. we do have to pick and choose between even the good applications on these grounds, since we have not sufficient funds to do otherwise.

It is perfectly true that the research administrator can manipulate the system by selecting the referees (though we also invite the applicant to supply two of his own choosing). I do not know how this can be overcome except by members of the committee watching the selection process in their own fields and reacting if they think unsuitable referees have been chosen. Dr. Horrobin says some referees are ignorant and careless and even deliberately obstructive. They are; but no astute editor or research administrator uses them twice. Our real problem is to avoid overloading with work those referees who consistently provide well-informed, sympathetic, and positively critical reports.

I can produce good evidence that fellows selected by the M.H.T.&R.F. Research Committee have justified our selection (no significance test, though, as the comparison