

Pentagon defends its anthrax-vaccine programme

The US Department of Defense (DoD) defended its Anthrax Vaccine Immunization Programme (AVIP) to Congress on March 1 in a point-by-point response to a subcommittee's scathing analysis of the programme (see *Lancet*, Feb 26, p 733).

The DoD countered that 1.4 million vaccines have been issued and that the vaccine is neither "experimental" nor "investigational". Other vaccines can be given to troops before they deploy but as the 6-dose regimen is the only licensed protocol "we must begin vaccinating now for future protection of the entire force", stated the DoD.

The House Subcommittee on National Security, Veteran Affairs and International Relations recommended that the DoD should accelerate research and development of a second-generation recombinant vaccine

Under evaluation

and pursue testing of a shorter shot regimen. The DoD agreed with both recommendations and stated that work towards both these goals was ongoing.

The subcommittee also suggested that the programme was logistically too complex to succeed and that vaccine safety was not adequately monitored. The DoD argued that its "multi-faceted surveillance programme" was presented in testimony to the subcommittee but was not recognised in the subcommittee's report. The DoD also pointed out that its automated immunisation tracking system will facilitate planned evaluation and treatment programmes for long-term studies, which the subcommittee recommended should be carried out for all recipients of the vaccine.

Haroon Ashraf

Panos Pictures

12 000 new jobs for French hospitals

After weeks of discussions with hospital workers' trade unions, France's Social Minister Martine Aubry announced on Feb 29 that 12 000 new jobs will be created in France's hospitals. Public-hospital budgets will be increased by FFfr3800 million this year and by FFfr10100 million by the end of 2002. This rise will help create new jobs and help upgrade hospital emergency units and psychiatric services.

Hospital workers have been on strike since January, protesting against the lack of nurses and bad working conditions (see *Lancet* 2000; 355: 558). Alongside the government's budget increase the hospital-doctors' trade union signed a new salary agreement with the government on March 4. The government hopes to make hospital careers more attractive since many doctors now prefer to work in independent practice or private clinics where salaries and conditions are better.

Denis Durand de Bousingen

Ireland's largest drug-abuse project still under fire

The head of the pressure group, Europe Against Drugs (EURAD), Grainne Kenny, has called on the friars who are considering providing their premises to the Merchant Quay project, Ireland's largest needle-exchange programme, to reconsider. She has also demanded the resignation of the project's director. Kenny said the Franciscan friars should take a "hard look" at what Merchants Quay is doing.

Merchants Quay's director, Tony Geoghagen, was quoted by the Irish media as advocating the provision of heroin to certain addicts. In response, Kenny said: "for too long now we have had to listen to this rubbish being fed to the public by Merchants Quay. To offer heroin to a heroin addict is as stupid as asking an alcoholic what his favourite tipple is, so that the treatment centre can offer a steady supply".

Geoghagen said his comments had been misinterpreted, distorted, and sensationalised and that he had simply proposed that all options be considered including the controversial proposal that some addicts might receive heroin in strictly controlled circumstances as part of a

programme to get the addict off the drug. "Ireland has the highest rate of drug deaths in the EU, and I would just argue that we shouldn't be blinkered about this. There are many different ways of dealing with drug use in Europe." But Geoghagen was not surprised at the demand for his resignation by EURAD: "They're against even methadone", he told the *Irish Times*. Ireland has an ongoing problem with community activists in many towns objecting to local methadone clinics. EURAD and local groups are opposed to the so-called "harm-reduction approach", which includes free needle exchange and long-term distribution of methadone.

The Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, said at his party's annual convention on March 4 that his party pledged that the government would be tackling the growing problem of drug addiction through innovative programmes that would offer young people an alternative to drugs. This includes the setting up of government-sponsored "internet cafes" in youth centres.

Karen Birchard

News in brief

Project "foundling" in Hamburg, Germany SterniPark EV, a youth welfare organisation, is putting beds in two foundling houses in Hamburg where mothers can leave unwanted babies anonymously. Jürgen Moysich, spokesman for SterniPark EV, said that an emergency phone number had been set up in December, 1999, where mothers of unwanted babies could call, receive help, and arrange to hand over their child. This system of depositing unwanted children anonymously aims to be a further measure to prevent infanticide and child exposure in Hamburg.

No money for UK haemophiliacs

The UK government announced on March 7 that it had decided not to compensate haemophiliacs who were infected by blood products contaminated by hepatitis C in the 1970s and 1980s. The government also rejected calls for a public inquiry into the case, which left 4000 people infected. The UK Haemophilia Society noted that 110 people have died since the 1980s after being infected with hepatitis C through contaminated blood products.