

## Australia: Compensation for medically acquired AIDS

The Victorian Government has announced that it will provide blanket compensation to every person who has acquired HIV infection medically, whether or not there is any question of negligence. Each of the 110 people identified so far will receive A\$200 000 plus free comprehensive medical treatment for life. That is a total commitment of A\$35 to A\$40 million. The Victorian Government followed the lead of the Western Australian Government which, in May, 1991, offered A\$280 000 to each of the 22 people in that state who had acquired HIV medically. The Government of New South Wales is considering the report of a parliamentary committee that recommended payments of up to A\$50 000 to each of the 350 people who acquired HIV through the transfusion of blood or blood products. Members of the committee described these people as "innocent victims".

Despite the apparent generosity and the pleasure of such organisations such as the Haemophilia Foundation of Australia, the decisions have been condemned by the federal Minister for Health and Deputy Prime Minister, Brian Howe. "People have a right to be properly compensated if they have suffered from medical negligence, but the [federal] government does not and will not distinguish between people because of the cause of their illness", he said. "As far as I am concerned, to call someone with HIV or AIDS an 'innocent victim' because they have acquired a disease one way, while someone else who has acquired it in a different way is by implication 'a guilty victim', is unjust and discriminatory." Howe, supported by most AIDS organisations, said he preferred the approach of the South Australian Government. In October, 1991, it offered out-of-court-settlements to those people who had sued the South Australian Government (as employer of the doctors who administered the transfusions) or Federal Government (as owner of the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, which provides the blood products) who it thought had a winnable case on the basis of negligence. There was no blanket compensation.

The decisions can only do harm to Australia's reputation for sensible policy-making on AIDS. Australia has responded quickly to HIV and has provided needle-exchange programmes, public education, and good counselling services. Although there is considerable debate over the direction of the education programmes, HIV infection has not spread rapidly in Australia. It is not common among intravenous drug users or heterosexuals. These decisions mark the first time Australian governments have discriminated openly between people with HIV on the basis of the route of transmission.

Mark Ragg

## Germany: Amalgam fillings

Whether amalgam fillings are dangerous or not has been debated for years. German dentists have so far denied a general risk, acknowledging only that there may be rare allergic reactions, whereas opponents of this view, such as the Munich toxicologist Dr Max Dauderer, have repeatedly drawn the attention of the public to the possible risks. Now the Federal Health Agency (Bundesgesundheitsamt, BGA) in Berlin has advised that amalgam fillings be used only for molars. The BGA has further announced that amalgam containing gamma-2, a

compound of tin and mercury, will be banned because of its instability and the risk of release of mercury during the filling procedure. Gamma-2 has been used only in a small proportion of fillings. There is no complete ban on amalgam, as pressed for by its opponents.

In explaining the reason for its decision, the BGA refers to statements made last year by the FDA and WHO and an internal BGA meeting of experts. Amalgam without gamma-2 contains 40% silver and up to 32% and 30% of tin and copper, respectively, but at most only 3% of mercury and 2% of zinc. How much free mercury is released from amalgam fillings is still very much a subject of debate, but estimates range from 3.8 to 21 µg mercury a day. Brushing or grinding the teeth, drinking hot fluid, and chewing gum can increase the rate of release. The scientific value of a test that uses dimercaptopropane sulfonic acid to measure the washout of mercury from amalgam fillings is disputed. Some studies suggest that the concentration of mercury in organs, blood, or urine correlates with the number of amalgam fillings. Surveys have also shown that concentrations of mercury in dental health personnel and workers in the mercury industry are below the maximum allowable.

The average German, with or without amalgam fillings, has 1 µg mercury per litre of blood, a lower concentration than that in Swedish or Japanese people, whose intake of fish is higher. Some 37 million dental cavities were filled with amalgam in Germany in 1990. Are they time bombs in the mouth, slowly poisoning the carrier and causing blindness, rheumatism, multiple sclerosis, or cancer? Isolated cases in which a connection was suspected have been publicised. However, the BGA committee denies on scientific grounds that such a threat exists and argues that there is no reason to abandon amalgam fillings altogether except in the rare cases of allergic or electrochemical reaction. The experts in the BGA point to an epidemiological study in Sweden that found no evidence that amalgam fillings cause any disease. But they nevertheless conclude that amalgam should be used only for molars, for which there is no adequate substitute—gold fillings are too expensive for the health insurance companies to cover in full and plastic would be cheaper but is not nearly as robust as gold or amalgam. The BGA also says that amalgam should not be used in pregnant women, patients with kidney failure, and toddlers, and that generally there is no reason to remove old amalgam fillings.

Annette Tuffs

## Russia: Anthrax in the Urals

A retired Soviet general has claimed that a mysterious outbreak of anthrax in the Urals in 1979, officially attributed to tainted meat, was in reality due to an accident at a military installation. General Andrey Mironyuk, a former specialist in counter-espionage and infiltration, who in April, 1979, was head of the "special department" of the Ural Military District, told an *Izvestiya* reporter last month that *Bacillus anthracis* had been accidentally released from a military laboratory known as "Compound 19". They had been carried by the wind to the neighbouring compound 32, which was used as a training base for reserve officers. But the whole incident became the focus of a massive cover-up and disinformation operation, and western journalists who several months later began to receive unofficial reports of what had occurred were accused of "anti-Soviet hysteria".