

breastfeeding, and unsafe drinking water. It recognises that until a balance is achieved between population growth and resources there will be an ever-increasing demand on agricultural production. The Declaration also notes how wars and civil disturbances in several continents have led to tens of millions of people becoming refugees or displaced persons, and thus nutritionally vulnerable.

The Plan of Action contains eight major themes. Among them are: improving household food security, preventing and managing infectious diseases, promoting healthy diets and life-styles, and protecting consumers through improved food quality and safety.

Alan McGregor

### Australia: "Reform" is a slight rise in tax

The federal government announced its budget on August 18 with what it describes as significant reforms to the health system. The centrepiece of the budget is an increase in the Medicare levy from 1.25% to 1.4% of taxable income, to take effect after the next federal election. Medicare is Australia's compulsory national health insurance scheme. The federal government has allocated \$135 million over six years to provide better community care for psychiatric patients. The government will also indirectly pressure state governments to close some of our Dickensian psychiatric institutions and integrate care into the general health system. Progress in this area is required—most long-term psychiatric patients were moved out of institutions in the mid-1980s but there has been no corresponding emphasis on provision of adequate community services to date. One of the more controversial proposals announced in the budget is to spend \$71 million over two years in an attempt to reduce waiting lists, which have been a feature of the health system since the early to mid-1980s. Part of this scheme is for the state governments to subsidise the treatment of uninsured patients in private hospitals. Distribution of the money from the federal government, which raises revenue, to the state governments, which spend it, depends upon the states signing the new five-year Medicare agreement by the end of the year.

Within hours of the scheme's announcement, there were two strikes against it. Conservative governments in Tasmania and New South Wales opposed it, saying that the allocated funding was too little, the scheme unsound, and they would not be bribed into signing the Medicare agreement unless it was significantly revamped (by which they meant it should contain much more money). Then the Australian Medical Association said contracting private hospitals to treat uninsured patients was an admission that Medicare had failed, and that it was considering a boycott.

Overall, the government plans to spend an extra \$1.59 billion over the next six years on public hospitals. But to describe the budget as one of significant reform seems a little unrealistic. Most of the measures announced are merely continuations of programmes started in the past two or three years. The extra money will do no more than reverse a trend of declining federal expenditure. Figures released recently by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show that the federal government's share of health expenditure has dropped from 46% in 1984–85 to 43% in 1990–91. The states' share of expenditure has remained stable—the bulk of the extra money has come from private sources. And despite public assumption, the Medicare levy is not a hypothecated tax which fully provides for our health care. It pays for less

than a quarter of the health insurance scheme's cost. So an increase in the Medicare levy is not a reform, but a slight rise in income tax.

Mark Ragg

### Europe: Illegal waste disposal repercussions

An issue that initially rated only small items in the French regional press has now transformed the European environmental debate. By unilaterally introducing, on August 20 (*Lancet*, Aug 22, p 477), a prohibition on all but specifically authorised waste imports, the Paris government has forced the issue of whether waste can continue to be treated as a merchandise allowed to move freely under the free trade system of the Single European Market.

On July 9, a ruling by the European Court of Justice seemed to interpret European Community (EC) legislation as meaning that waste should be allowed to pass frontiers freely and that governments could not introduce prohibitions. The diplomatic challenge facing Britain, EC president, will be to contain a potentially disruptive dispute when environment ministers meet on October 20 to discuss draft legislation on waste self-sufficiency. Even before the hospital waste affair erupted, France had been delaying agreement by demanding that the regulations should commit member states to an early deadline for self-sufficiency with harmful waste.

If only on this issue, it has been a good time for the beleaguered administration of President Francois Mitterand. With scarcely a whimper of protest from France's 11 EC partners or from the Commission itself, draconian trade restrictions and systematic border controls had been imposed in a fashion spectacularly at odds with the spirit of the Single Market. Within the country, legislation intended to counter the perception that France had become Germany's dustbin was almost universally welcomed. The Prime Minister, Pierre Bérégovoy, had been seen to be acting firmly in the national interest, at a time when the tide seemed to be turning against the Government in the run-up to the national referendum on the Maastricht Treaty on September 20. German environment minister Klaus Töpfer had suffered the indignity of having to vacate his holiday sunbed in Turkey to fly to Paris, there to plead unsuccessfully for a stay of execution. Finally, the relatively inexperienced environment minister, Mme Ségolène Royal, emerged from the affair with a status only slightly less than that of Jeanne D'Arc.

It was left to lesser voices to point out that at least one of the twenty consignments intercepted by French customs contained only six used syringes in a 21-tonne load of domestic waste—and that the lucrative shipment of household refuse for disposal in France will almost certainly resume on a regulated basis, as soon as administrative arrangements are worked out by regional authorities in France and Germany. Since French prefectures could hardly authorise disposal at any of the nations's 5000 unlicensed dumps, which are due to be phased out by the end of the decade, the beneficiaries are likely to be the big names in the French disposal industry. Equally, only imports of waste for final disposal are banned; consignments intended for recycling under officially approved arrangements will continue.

But several major German cities that relied on disposal in France—notably Ulm and Heidelberg—face an immediate crisis. Neither city can store more than a week's domestic