

## AIDS

## Poland's minister for prophylaxis

THE Polish Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, has appointed a special "plenipotentiary" for AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), it was announced last week. Professor Jerzy Bonczak, who is already a deputy minister, will be in charge of a programme of epidemiological examination among those considered to be particularly at risk: homosexuals, bisexuals, drug addicts and haemophiliacs. This will be followed by a nationwide screening of blood donors. Clinicians are being trained, and a contingency treatment centre prepared. A special grant of hard currency has been made to the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare to enable rapid diagnostic kits to be purchased from the West.

The threat of AIDS has been a matter of public alarm in Poland for the past two years. The run-down of the pharmaceutical and medical supply industries under the Gierk regime meant that, by 1980, even such basic equipment as catheters and hypodermics were virtually unobtainable. Lech Walesa's "Medical Rescue Bank", which arranged supplies from Western charitable organizations, has luckily survived the overthrow of Solidarity under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Church, but throughout 1982 and 1983, "disposables" were in such short supply that hospitals had no option but to sterilize and reuse such items over and over again. Although supply has improved, according to one Warsaw doctor, some reuse of disposables is still necessary.

Drug addiction, moreover, is a growing problem in Poland. Poppies are a cash crop (the seeds are used for cooking), and the illegal manufacture of opium derivatives from the straw has been going on for decades. But until 1980, the government refused to acknowledge the problem, and consequently took no counter-measures. Now, there are estimated to be at least 200,000 addicts, two-thirds of whom are under 21.

So far, according to Jan Suchowiak, director of the Department of Public Health of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Poland has had no "clinically diagnosed" cases of AIDS, although there have been "a few suspect cases", in which the "probability of AIDS" was later "excluded".

In general, details on AIDS within the socialist bloc are hard to come by, partly because of the tendency in the press to play down information liable to cause alarm and despondency but also, undoubtedly, due to the initial identification of AIDS as a disease of homosexuals. In the Soviet Union, where active homosexuality is a legal offence for which compulsory psychiatric treatment may be ordered by the courts, AIDS was at first described as a "disease of capitalism", thus simul-

taneously castigating the West and reassuring the Soviet public. The same approach was abandoned in Czechoslovakia, when two suspected cases of AIDS (a visitor from Africa and one of his contacts) were reported in Prague.

So far, only Poland has announced plans for dealing with a possible outbreak of AIDS, but there is growing concern with what may be styled "AIDS-related" issues in other socialist countries. Thus at the end of June, Budapest radio reported a "violent debate", at a session of the Cen-

tral Leadership of the Union of Medical and Health Workers, over the lack of proper sterilization facilities in hospitals and dental surgeries. Also in June, an unusually sympathetic "academic meeting" was held in Leipzig on the "psycho-social problems of homosexuality", with particular emphasis on counselling. At least one country, however, is still prepared to tackle the AIDS problem by a straight denial; two weeks ago, the Yugoslav Federal Secretariat for Information held a special press conference to dispel public concern by announcing that, despite rumours to the contrary, not a single case of AIDS had been "registered" in Yugoslavia. **Vera Rich**

### Halley's comet

## Per astra ad pecuniam

Tokyo

AFTER the successful launch of a probe to Halley's comet last month by Japan's Institute of Space and Astronautical Science (ISAS) (see *Nature* 316, 669; 1985), preparations are in hand for the arrival of the comet later this year. And, if all goes according to the plans of Japan's Halley's Comet Society, the comet's nearest approach in March/April next year will culminate in a blackout of Tokyo and an invasion of Australia by three jumbo jet-loads of Japanese.

In a country where short-term fads can make millions and where getting drunk while gazing at the Moon is a time-

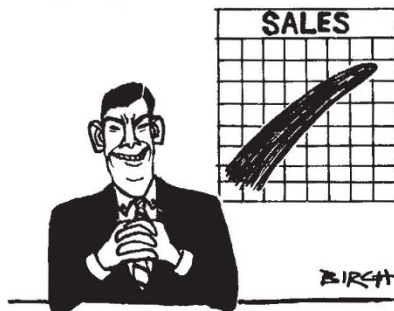
between autumn and spring next year. But the society's two big events are a plan to turn the lights out in Tokyo during the early hours of 21 March and a trip to Australia in April next year.

The "blackout campaign" follows a similar attempt to dim the lights of Japan thirteen years ago, when the Giacobini-Zinner meteorite shower was expected. That campaign was only a partial success — although big companies like Matsushita Electric were persuaded to switch out their lights, the meteorites failed to turn up. A similar problem may bedevil next year's blackout; on 21 March Halley's comet will be low in the sky, skirting Tokyo's skyscrapers at 15° elevation and will have a magnitude of only 4.4, barely visible to the naked eye. Society officials are undaunted, however, and consider the campaign will be a success if it gets the Japanese public to look heavenward.

For a chance to see Halley's comet high in the sky, the society is chartering three jumbo jets from Japan Air Lines (JAL) to go to Bathurst, New South Wales, the following month. About half the seats have already been filled since places went on sale last month, despite the ¥378,000 (£1,150) price. Akira Fujii, a prominent amateur astronomer, is making a 51-cm reflecting telescope for the society and Japan's TBS television station plans to broadcast pictures taken through it live from Bathurst via a satellite link-up.

Following the recent unbridled success of an advertising campaign associated with the import of koalas to Japan, in which the cute cuddly bears were used to sell everything from key holders to piggy banks, the sponsors of the Japan Halley's Comet Society, including JAL, Kanebo, Minolta and Fuji Film, will no doubt take full advantage of the publicity associated with the arrival of Halley's comet. In fact, Kanebo is already using the society's comet-like logo to sell cosmetics, while telescope manufacturers report a doubling in telescope sales this year.

**David Swinbanks**



honoured tradition, Japan's advertising giant Dentsu was quick to realize the potential of the return of Halley's comet. It was at Dentsu's suggestion that the Japan Halley's Comet Society was founded in March last year. Headed by prominent academics, including Sadao Murayama of the National Science Museum, Shinya Obi, emeritus professor of Tokyo University and Tatsuzo Obayashi, professor of ISAS, the society has the lofty aim of "increasing the Japanese people's awareness of natural sciences and astronomy", according to spokesman Noriaki Funada. The society boasts a membership of over 6,000, ranging in age from three to ninety.

The society publishes a brochure on Halley's comet four times a year, is holding meetings at planetariums in cities all over Japan and is organizing observing meetings in various parts of the country