

# Ban on use of fetal tissue to continue

- Abortion politics sway the decision
- AIDS researchers to enter the fray?

## Washington

LAST week's decision by Louis Sullivan, Secretary of Health and Human Services, to continue indefinitely the moratorium on federal funding of research in which human fetal tissue from induced abortions is transplanted into human recipients was long expected, but has nonetheless aroused strong opposition.

The ban was imposed temporarily in 1988 after the National Institutes of Health (NIH) requested the assistant secretary for health's approval of an experimental implant of human fetal cells into the brain of a patient with Parkinson's disease, although approval for the experiment was not formally required. The NIH panel concluded that such research should be permitted provided safeguards were developed to prevent commercialization of fetal tissue and to separate the abortion procedure from the use of the fetal tissue. Anti-abortion activists criticized the report, arguing that its members were carefully selected by former NIH director James Wyngaarden to ensure that it would support this research. The administration rejected the advice anyway, and imposed the ban.

In a letter sent last week to Bill Raub, acting director of NIH, Sullivan stated that permitting such research would increase the incidence of abortions, and that he was "particularly convinced" by the argument that most women are equivocal about a decision to abort so that knowing that the abortion would contribute to some beneficial research might swing the decision in favour of an abortion. The NIH panel concluded that this was "highly unlikely" and could be minimized by a prohibition on discussion of the use of the fetal tissue until after the decision to abort. In the letter, Sullivan responded that such a distinction would be in practice impossible to maintain.

Clinical trials to assess the efficacy of fetal tissue in treating Parkinson's disease and juvenile diabetes are under way without federal support. But Robert Petersdorf, president of the Association of American Medical Colleges, claims that without federal funds this research will be slowed considerably, and accuses the administration of ignoring the suffering of millions who could benefit in order to accommodate a single, uncompromising segment of the community.

Predictably, Sullivan's decision was immediately welcomed by John Willke, president of the National Right to Life

Committee, and denounced by the United Parkinson Foundation, American Paralysis Association and the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation International. But a vigorous campaign against the ban is being mounted by the AIDS community, which until now has played no part in the debate. The New York-based lobbying group for AIDS patients, ACT-UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power), believes that research involving fetal tissue is one of the most promising fields of AIDS research and has persuaded the New York Civil Liberties Union to consider taking legal action against the administration for restricting research with potential to treat a life-threatening disease.

The enthusiasm of the AIDS community for fetal tissue research was inspired by Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, who was guest speaker at an ACT-UP meeting two weeks ago. According to the transcript of the meeting, Fauci said that "fetal liver cells . . . may very well be able to completely suppress the virus and allow reconstitution [of the immune-system]". Asked whether such research might be possible while the administration is staunchly opposed to fetal tissue research, Fauci said there might have to be "some very serious pressure . . . and some real rethinking about that". Fauci could not be reached for further comment.

The House of Representatives subcommittee on health and the environment is to try to muster support in Congress for lifting the ban and will hold hearings on the issue. Subcommittee chairman Henry Waxman (Democrat - California) criticized Sullivan's decision, saying it would be "tragic" to reject the NIH panel's "sensitive and thoughtful" recommendations on the basis of abortion politics.

Christine McGourty

Signs of struggle  
*FREEDOM*



THE US space station now has a logo,  
but the struggle for funds continues,  
page 109.

## ANTARCTIC OZONE

### Ozone hole heading south prematurely

#### Washington

THIS year's ozone loss over the Antarctic, which has already surprised many climatologists by its unexpected severity, is adding to the puzzlement by beginning to break up unusually early in the season. Last week, researchers from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced that atmospheric conditions around the South Pole were becoming more active, disrupting the polar stratospheric vortex and sending volumes of ozone-poor air over the tip of South America and the Falkland Islands.

In the few years that the southern ozone hole has been recorded, an approximate two-year cycle has emerged, with odd-numbered years showing greater depletion than even-numbered. This phenomenon had been linked with another approximate two-year cycle in the Earth's atmosphere, the Quasi-Biennial Oscillation (QBO). The driving mechanism of the QBO is not known, but it is marked by a yearly reversal of the direction of stratospheric winds at mid-southern latitudes. The empirical pattern has been that, in odd years, when the QBO is in a westerly phase, the polar vortex has been stable, isolating the Antarctic air from the rest of the southern circulation, and the hole in the ozone layer has been deep.

This year, the ozone hole began to form early and quickly, as it did in 1987, and by 3 October it was apparent that the ozone depletion would be as great, and affect as large an area, as it did two years ago. But this is not the confirmation of the two-year cycle that it seems to be at first glance. Earlier this year, atmospheric scientists noted that the QBO was behaving erratically, and that the mid-latitude winds remained in an easterly phase. This led to expectations of strong atmospheric dynamics, a weak polar vortex, and a small ozone hole.

But what happened instead during the austral spring was that atmospheric dynamics remained calm despite the QBO being in its easterly phase, and the polar vortex was strong. This led to a big ozone hole, but after only a month stratospheric motions are increasing and the vortex is beginning to disperse, mixing the ozone-poor Antarctic air into the general circulation of the Southern Hemisphere.

What has broken down this year is the simplistic link between the direction of the mid-latitude winds and the strength of the polar vortex, although the early break-up may indicate a somewhat belated attempt by the stratosphere to catch up with the QBO.

Atmospheric scientists will now be looking for a set of meteorological observations to which the severity of ozone loss is more reliably correlated. David Lindley