RU-486 ABORTION DRUG

Back-door trial for US?

Washington

THE controversy over the French abortion pill RU-486 looks set to reopen in the United States following an announcement by California state officials that they are making plans for the first US tests of the drug. But California's efforts may prove to be a vain political gesture — the manufacturers of RU-486, Roussel Uclaf of Paris, are unwilling to ignore continuing opposition from US anti-abortion groups and supply the pill for clinical trials.

California's Attorney General John Van de Kamp is urging the State Health Department's Food and Drug Branch (FDB) to use a 1987 state law introduced for speeding tests of AIDS drugs to initiate rapid clinical trials of RU-486 in California. The state law would enable Roussel Uclaf to by-pass the long process of approval by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) through which most US drug licences are granted.

Although RU-486 has yet to be tested in the United States, it has been used by more than 40,000 women in France, and is undergoing trials in more than a dozen other countries. Roussel Uclaf plans to market it in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Scandinavia.

The State Health Department's director Ken Kizer says that under the current law California would authorize testing of RU-486 if it received an appropriate application from its manufacturers, but that the speed of a clinical trial would depend on the availability of State financing.

John Van de Kamp, who wrote the 1987 legislation, has already promised financial support for clinical trials of RU-486 if he is elected Governor of California in the January 1991 election. Researchers at the University of California Medical School, led by Marcus Conant, are now preparing a trial protocol which they hope to submit for State approval.

The Attorney General's office is optimistic that their moves will persuade Roussel Uclaf to apply for clinical trials. "The consensus is that that [Roussel Uclaf] will not be looked on favourably at the FDA and what they want is a favourable regulatory climate", said an office spokesman. "We would welcome a trial application, process it as expeditiously as possible and get the tests under way", he added.

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America is more sceptical. Louise Tyrer, its vice-president for medical affairs, said that they along with a "parade" of other pro-choice groups had met with little success in persuading Roussel Uclaf to market RU-486 in the United States, and that the moves for independent Californian trials stem more from political posturing than "reality".

At present, the United States could obtain RU-486 only through the World Health Organization (WHO) which funded some of Roussel Uclaf's research and has a contract to sell the drug at cost price. But WHO's first concern is with the developing world and is an unlikely source of RU-486 for California.

Following events in France, where Roussel Uclaf at one stage withdrew RU-486 in the wake of threats from the US Right to Life Committee to boycott Roussel-Uclaf products and those of Hoechst, the majority share-holders (see *Nature* **340**, 6: 6 July 1989), the company's directors are nervous about supplying the drug for tests in the United States.

Madame Mouttet, responsible for marketing RU-486 in France, said that claims that clinical trials are to begin in California are "not true". "To carry out trials, they would need supplies of RU-486 and Roussel Uclaf has no intention of providing the drug". She says the company has no intention of marketing the drug in the United States for the forseeable future — at least until the "political and social" problems associated with abortion in the United States are ironed out. **David Concar**

NASA EXPERIMENT

Return of the mutant tomatoes

Washington

HUNDREDS of US schoolchildren who had planned to grow tomato plants from seeds that had spent six years in orbit switched to the terrestrial variety last week after newspapers quoted a government memorandum that suggested the space-borne seeds could be dangerous. The NASA memorandum stated: "There is a remote possibility that radiation-caused mutations could cause the plants to produce toxic fruit".

NASA's Long Duration Exposure Facility carried 12.5 million of the seeds until its return in January. Packets of the seeds were sent to 58,000 teachers nationwide as part of a programme to encourage children to become interested in science and space by participating in a simple experiment comparing the growth of normal tomato plants with those exposed to six years of cosmic radiation.

NASA had not anticipated that the children would be tempted to eat the fruit, and the included instructions carried no warning against consuming the experiment. At a press conference late last week NASA said that the seeds were exposed to less radiation than many earth-grown varieties and would be "as safe as any fruit you buy at your local grocers".

G. Christopher Anderson

BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS

New suit targets university laboratories

Boston

JEREMY Rifkin, head of Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington, DC, is attempting to continue his run of winning lawsuits with new action designed to stop projects paid for by the Pentagon Biological Defense Research programme at some fifty universities and research institutes in the United States.

Rifkin has been fighting biological weapons research for half a decade. In 1985, a suit brought by Rifkin's organization halted the construction of a controversial aerosol testing facility in Dugway, Utah. In 1987, Rifkin forced the US Defense Department to conduct an environmental impact assessment of the entire Biological Defense Research Program. With that assessment complete at the end of last year, Rifkin is now back in court, calling the document "grossly inadequate" and trying to force the programme to close as a health and environmental threat.

The new legal case, filed on 4 April in federal district court, calls for projects rated as of higher risk by the Pentagon to be suspended until individual environmental assessments are conducted for each of them. Charles Dasey, an Army spokesman, says the Army will not comment on the pending lawsuit, but stands by its decision last December to continue the $60-million programme. Dasey noted that the Army's official decision, after completing its environmental assessment, was to continue its funding because of the "overriding national importance of the programme and the insignificant effect of the existing programme on the quality of the human environment". Yale Medical School's Arbovirus Research Unit comes in for particular criticism from Rifkin. The laboratory, which receives funding from the Pentagon's Biological Defense Research Program, conducts research on arboviruses which are borne by insect-vectors and cause diseases such as yellow fever. Rifkin, who believes that research on such deadly diseases needs to be better protected against the threat of sabotage or accidental release of the infectious agents, says the Yale laboratory is "probably the most dangerous single university lab in the country," and alleges that the laboratory safety procedures and emergency protocols are "almost a joke." Gregory Tignor, who heads the Arbovirus Research Unit, has said in the Yale university newspaper that he takes "personal offense" at Rifkin's accusations. Tignor, who notes that his unit has never had an accident, says the laboratory is "serious" about safety issues. But Tignor also says that he would probably apply only for National Institutes of Health grants in the future. "I don't want the controversy," he said.

Seth Shulman