

Next steps against AIDS

The South African government at last has an opportunity to fight AIDS with drugs at reduced prices without fear of legal action. The country has the capacity to make significant progress. The government should make use of it.

The withdrawal last week of the case against the South African government by the country's Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association and 39 drug companies (see page 1013) should be widely welcomed. After more than three years of attrition, it is high time that the industry and government begin to work together to address mother-to-child transmission of HIV, as well as the treatment of South Africa's estimated half a million AIDS sufferers.

The ball now lies in the court of the South African government, which can no longer remain paralysed over AIDS policy. The reaction of its health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, has been disappointing. Her statement that the government has no intention of importing antiretrovirals in the near future raises suspicions that the government refuses to confront the realities of the country's predicament. The same is true of her claims that treating opportunistic infections and providing adequate nutrition will permit AIDS sufferers to "function adequately".

No one is under any illusions that the next steps will be easy: South Africa is estimated to have the greatest number of HIV-positive people — 4.7 million — of any nation. But its medical infrastructure is, by the standards of the developing world, relatively good, and most of its population is urban and has access to treatment. In many parts of the country the capacity to administer the drugs adequately and effectively is in place, despite government claims to the contrary. It would be tragic if AIDS sufferers and unborn children were not to benefit from the offers of cheap or free drugs.

In most cases, the offers from manufacturers are confined to the government sector. Drug companies would do well to consider the

example of GlaxoSmithKline in extending its offer of reduced prices to non-governmental organizations and private employers who offer care to their staff through clinics at their own workplace. But this can nonetheless serve only a fraction of the people who could potentially benefit from concerted government action.

Tshabalala-Msimang is in Europe next month to negotiate with the drug companies on the regulations regarding the South African legislation. Reportedly, the South African government has undertaken to confine parallel importation of drugs to branded versions under patent in South Africa rather than import generic copies, and to issue compulsory licences in compliance with the Patents Act. This should reduce disparities in drug prices between markets, while enshrining intellectual property rights. Such a compromise should hopefully be reflected in good legislation, but that will serve little purpose unless it is applied.

The end of the South African suit will switch attention to the possible action being brought against Brazil within the World Trade Organization (WTO), backed by the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America. The association says Brazil is flouting the treaty relating to intellectual property rights by making cheap copies of patented AIDS drugs. The case will soon go before the WTO, and hopefully, as in South Africa, the outcome will be a realistic compromise. Brazil is an example of how a relatively poor country can treat AIDS — admittedly significantly less prevalent than in South Africa — if it has access to cheaper generic drugs: AIDS deaths have halved since the government began providing cut-price treatment. The South African government should seize the opportunity to follow that example, with its own hard-won compromise from industry behind it. ■

Astronomy, goddesses and knowledge

Conflict between science and spiritual traditions in Hawaii can be overcome by common interests.

Astronomers might once have considered themselves lucky to work so close to heaven. Now it seems a liability. High mountaintops in Arizona and Hawaii have become battlegrounds between scientists straining to improve their view of the Universe and traditional peoples who have scaled the same heights for centuries, seeking other kinds of knowledge.

A neutral observer might see room at the top for both. But the increasingly common clashes over sacred mountains such as Mauna Kea (see page 1015) are made vastly more difficult by the mutual suspicion and hurt feelings that are endemic to the politics of culture.

Hawaii, the last state to join the United States in 1959, has seen a resurgence of pride in traditional Polynesian culture in recent years. In 1993, the US government took the extraordinary measure of issuing an official apology to native Hawaiians for the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii 100 years earlier. Just this month, the state's two US senators, mindful of sentiment back home, reintroduced a bill in Congress to establish a quasi-sovereign Native Hawaiian government.

Having enjoyed mostly good relations with the 'Aloha State' for more than 30 years, scientists, who come almost exclusively from the

mainland, are being swept along by this rising cultural tide. If Hawaiian traditionalists feel bullied by astronomers and their big, expensive machines, the scientists have had their own feelings hurt, and resent being lumped in with shopping-mall builders and golf-course developers as symbols of Western crassness. Many astronomers believe that they, too, are on a quest for truth and beauty.

So what is to be done? NASA, the US space agency (which, ironically, rarely dabbles in ground-based astronomy, and must wish it never had in this case), is following the right course. Frustrating as it surely is to be castigated in town meeting after town meeting, NASA managers should remain respectful of Hawaiian traditions, and continue their 'constructive engagement'. Astronomers familiar with the Mauna Kea issue admit that scientists could be more sensitive to the fact that they're working in someone else's church.

The native Hawaiian opposition, for its part, should recognize good-faith gestures when they're offered. And they should ask themselves: do we really want to drive these telescopes — which reveal a grandness to nature that our ancestors would have appreciated — off the mountain for ever? ■