

Sheep-dip chemicals claimed 'safe' if used by rule-book

[LONDON] Despite growing concern among sheep farmers, backed by some scientists, a British advisory panel last week issued a report stating that organophosphorus (OP) sheep dips are safe when used according to the manufacturers' instructions.

The report, by the veterinary products committee of the Ministry of Agriculture, calls for more basic research into OPs, ensuring that sheep-dip users are trained, and simplified labelling. The government has promised to act on the recommendations.

The report was prompted by growth in the number of sheep farmers reporting symptoms of apparent OP poisoning. Typically, a flu-like episode is followed by breathing problems, joint and muscle pain, fatigue, trembling, and mood swings.

The pesticides, used to control sheep scab by total immersion of the sheep in a solution, are known to cause neurotoxicological problems when in high concentration in humans. People in contact with the sheep-dip are advised to wear protective clothes.

The report's conclusion remains controversial. "The jury is still out over whether people can use OPs long-term without problems," says Alastair Hay, reader in chemical pathology at the University of

Leeds. Hay is unconvinced that poisoning symptoms are always explained by the absence of protective clothing.

Umbilical cord patent under challenge

[PARIS] The European Cord Blood Bank (Eurocord), a network of 14 research teams, has as expected (see *Nature* 382, 6; 1996) challenged a European patent granted to the US company Biocyte Corporation on the use of stored stem cells from umbilical cord blood. A separate challenge was simultaneously filed by a consortium of 30 environmental and other lobby groups led by Global 2000, an Austrian green group.

Both Eurocord and Global 2000 claim that the patent fails to meet the legal criteria of novelty and non-obviousness. Cord blood is a source of stem cells which can produce platelets and red and white blood cells, and promise to be simpler and more effective in bone-marrow transplants than using stem cells from donor marrow.

Support for labels on gene-altered food

[WASHINGTON] A leading biotechnology company has announced its support for the labelling of all genetically engineered crops and food products. Novartis, the Swiss chemical, agricultural and drug giant

formed last year from the merger of Sandoz and Ciba-Geigy, outlined its position at a news conference in Boston, Massachusetts, on 24 February. Company officials acknowledge that there is no need for labelling from a scientific and safety standpoint, but say that if the industry believes in the consumers' right to choose, it "cannot reasonably argue against labels facilitating this choice".

Nobel laureate receives one-year sentence

[WASHINGTON] Daniel Carleton Gajdusek, the Nobel prizewinning virologist, pleaded guilty last week to a charge of sexually abusing a boy he brought from Micronesia to live with him in his home not far from the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. Gajdusek, who is 73, was until last week chief of the Laboratory for Central Nervous System Studies at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

Gajdusek will serve nine to 12 months in Frederick County jail, followed by five years' probation, during which he may leave the United States. He was arrested last April. His plea agreement with state prosecutors, under which two counts of unnatural and perverted sexual practices were dropped, allowed him to avoid a potential 30-year prison sentence.

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