

news in brief

● **Birmingham University to be prosecuted:** The UK Health and Safety Executive is to prosecute Birmingham University following the smallpox outbreak from the medical school last August which led to the death of Mrs Janet Parker, a medical photographer, and was followed by the suicide of Professor Henry Bedson, who was head of the laboratory. A date for the start of the hearing has yet to be fixed; a spokesman for the HSE believed it would be early next year.

The university is to be prosecuted for "alleged failure to ensure, so far as was reasonably practicable, the health of its employees in the east wing of the medical school," according to a statement by the HSE last Thursday.

In a statement, the HSE reaffirmed the need for all medical establishments to make sure that the necessary precautions were observed in dealing with all category A pathogens, especially smallpox. The safety guidelines are contained in the HSE publication "Control of laboratory use of pathogens dangerous to humans".

The HSE is to base its case on its own investigations. Meanwhile, Professor Reginald Shooter, chairman of the Dangerous Pathogens Advisory Group, is conducting an official government inquiry into the incident, which is also expected to be completed early next year.

● **US asked to reveal data on A-bomb tests:** The US Government has been asked to declassify all documents on atmospheric tests in the 1950s in an attempt to determine whether the tests were responsible for an abnormally high incidence of cancers in populations exposed to radioactive fall-out. The request has come from Governor Scott Matheson of Utah, who has expressed concern at an 11-year-old unpublished study by health officials which shows unexplained clusters of leukaemia victims in southern Utah in the path of fall-out from atomic bomb tests that took place between 1951 and 1962.

Thirty-eight claims have been filed against the Department of Energy by attorneys for survivors of cancer victims in southern Utah and Northern Arizona seeking more than \$1 million in damages for each of nine cancer deaths. It is expected that up to 250 further such claims will be filed in the near future. The claims are the first to have been filed against the government on behalf of civilians not directly connected with the bomb testing programme, but merely living in the path of radioactive clouds.

Last week a federal judge in Newark, New Jersey ruled that the US Army must surrender films and recordings of atomic bomb tests conducted in 1953 in order that a 47-year-old cancer victim, who says he was forced to witness a blast, can compile evidence in a \$13 million negligence suit.

● **£350,000 science awards:** Victor Hasselblad (right), inventor of the famous Hasselblad camera, who died earlier this year, left part of his fortune to establish awards similar to the Nobel prizes. From March next year, prizes worth a total of £350,000 are to be awarded each year to selected scientists for research into the natural sciences. The awards will be chosen by the Erna and Victor Hasselblad Foundation. According to a government official in Stockholm, Victor Hasselblad's instructions for the selection of scientists and the areas of the natural sciences for which the awards will be given, are in a sealed envelope which has yet to be opened by the executors of his will.



● **Lerner still cannot leave Russia:** Dr Aleksandr Lerner (left), the Moscow cyberneticist, has taken over the unenviable position as doyen of the *refusnik* scientists, now that Veniamin Levich has finally arrived in Vienna. Lerner, who is 66, has been waiting for an emigration visa for Israel for seven years. In the meantime, he has been working privately on a project for an artificial heart.

According to his daughter Sonia Levin, who visited London last week, Dr Lerner has now completed the basic control programme and the main priority is now for him to be able to collaborate freely with haematologists to establish the reaction of the blood to such an artificial organ. This, however, is not possible in the limbo conditions of a *refusnik* and the Soviet authorities have intimated to Dr Lerner that they would rather see him inactive in Moscow than doing useful work elsewhere.

Furthermore, some kind of personal reprisal seems involved due to Dr Lerner's activity in the Jewish emigration movement. US Congressman Rhodes, leader of the Republican party in the House of Representatives, says he was informed by the Soviet ambassador to the USA, that Dr Lerner would never be granted an emigration visa, because he is a "trouble maker".

● **Lead absorption higher than expected:** Scientists at the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell have shown that the proportion of lead from car exhausts absorbed by the human body is higher than previously expected. Denis Howell, Minister of State for the Environment, said: "This is an important finding and may be particularly significant where people are exposed to high levels of airborne lead from petrol."

The scientists confirmed that the majority of lead in blood comes from eating and drinking; lead from the air generally contributes less than 10% of the body's total uptake. However, at high concentrations, for example, people living near the busiest stretch of the M4, the contribution of air lead is comparable to that from diet. Sixty per cent of the lead inhaled by volunteers sitting near a motorway was deposited in the lungs. This finding agreed with earlier estimates. But the percentage of lead deposited in the lungs for people near urban roads was much higher than expected, at 48%.

The effect of lead on health, which was not considered by the scientists at Harwell, is to be assessed by a working party of independent experts which has been set up by the Social Service Secretary.

● **Kennedy plans hearings on biomedical research:** Senator Edward Kennedy has announced that the Senate health and science subcommittee of which he is chairman will hold a series of oversight hearings into the funding of biomedical and behavioural research early in the next session of Congress. Speaking during a ceremony to present the Albert Lasker awards for public health service and basic medical care research, Mr Kennedy said that in 1977 the US invested only 3.4% of its "health care dollar" in biomedical and behavioural research, compared with 4.9% in 1967.

"That decline in our overall commitment to research is short sighted and regrettable. It cheats our health care system of potential breakthroughs which will ultimately permit us to restrain health care costs without harsh regulatory controls. It has become apparent that our government has no clear system for setting priorities."