

Drugs for developing countries

Uncharitable stance from Oxfam

In the poorer countries of the world, millions of people suffer unnecessary ill health or die because simple drugs such as antibiotics are not available. But to what extent have the marketing methods of the multinational pharmaceutical manufacturers contributed towards the misuse and waste of drugs in the Third World?

According to the British charity Oxfam, the manufacturers have blatantly promoted inappropriate and harmful drugs in developing countries, which lack the tight governmental control on drug sale and distribution now normal in wealthy nations. And last week Oxfam renewed its attack on the industry by publishing a new study, "Bitter Pills" by Dianna Melrose. Despite a rider from the charity's director-general Brian Walker, recognizing the "valuable contribution of the research-based drug industry to world health", the study casts the industry as the villain of the piece.

But the industry, in the shape of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI), says that until it proves possible to build up adequate health-care systems in the poorer countries so that appropriate drugs can be properly prescribed and distributed, there is little the industry can do.

Abuses cited by Oxfam fieldworkers include: the maintenance of "high prices" for pharmaceuticals; inaccurate or misleading promotional literature; and aggressive promotion of "non-essential" drugs at the expense of more vital products. A common complaint is that over-prescription is encouraged — so, for instance, an impoverished patient with a bacterial infection might be prescribed a tonic and a multivitamin preparation in addition to the vital antibiotic. Since the antibiotic is likely to be the most expensive of the three, and the patient cannot afford them all, the cheaper, heavily promoted tonic and multivitamins may be preferred.

One of Oxfam's answers to over-prescription is to limit the number of drugs on sale in developing countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) has issued a list of approximately 200 "essential" drugs (many others being deemed "useful") for developing countries, and in June Bangladesh's military government took the

dramatic step of banning the sale of more than 1,700 drugs termed "harmful" or "unnecessary" and allowing only 150 "essential" drugs from the WHO list to remain on the market (*Nature* 15 July, p.219). Local and international drug manufacturers objected, but although there have been some additions to the list of permitted drugs after strong protests, the government is to go ahead with its plan.

Thus events in Bangladesh over the next few years should show just what can be



achieved by severely restricting drug supply in a country where many of the problems of distribution, prescribing and poverty persist.

There seems little doubt that a policy based on greater promotion of WHO's 200 "essential" drugs for the developing world will be of some benefit. About 50 drug companies are already cooperating with WHO by promising favourable prices for listed drugs, although further moves like that in Bangladesh actually to prohibit the sale of products not listed would not be likely to encourage further cooperation.

Oxfam, though, seems likely to remain unconvinced. WHO is seen as well intentioned, but "a toothless tiger", in the words of Oxfam's Dianna Melrose, and there is mutual distrust between Oxfam and the drugs industry. Were the two camps to stress the many views they hold in common rather than relish the differences, the world's developing countries could only benefit.

Charles Wenz

British universities

Agony at Aston

The legal quirk that provides security of tenure for full-time academics at British universities is likely to be tested in a forthcoming battle between the University of Aston in Birmingham and the Association of University Teachers (AUT). The outcome will set an important precedent for other universities.

Aston was told in July 1981 by the University Grants Committee (UGC) that its budget would be reduced by 30 per cent in the succeeding three years. A large-scale programme of voluntary redundancies has already been approved, but now the university's council has voted by a narrow margin (19 votes to 17, with one absentee and one abstention) to effect compulsory redundancies under the 1975 Employment Protection Act. It is thought that 41 academics (chiefly in the fields of engineering and mathematics) could be given notice before Christmas.

The union, according to its general secretary, Mr Laurie Sapper, is prepared to fight all the way. An application to the High Court for a writ to prevent the redundancies is being considered. The grounds of the action are that compulsory redundancies would be contrary to the charter and statutes of the university which (like those of most universities in England and Wales) specify that "no member of staff . . . shall be removed from office . . ." except on grounds such as physical or mental incapacity and immoral, scandalous or criminal behaviour; there is no mention of financial circumstances as a cause for dismissal.

AUT has sought access to the university's accounting figures so that it can carry out its own examination of the university's finances, but Mr Sapper says that Professor Frederick Crawford, Aston's vice-chancellor, has failed to respond to AUT's letters. AUT has accordingly applied for access under the Employment Protection Act.

Aston is primarily technology-based, and has forged extensive links with local industry. The university says that the unemployment rate among its graduates is one of the lowest in Britain.

UGC recommended in July 1981 that student numbers in several science subjects should be reduced and that courses in biological science and architecture should be discontinued. Aston has already axed its courses in human communication and behavioural sciences. The number of science students has fallen from 3,100 in 1980-81 to 2,732 now, while arts student numbers have fallen from 1,383 to 1,340, but further reductions have still to be made. Full-time academic staff, of whom there were 522 in August 1981, will have to be reduced to 357 by July 1984.

At the same time, the university plans to recruit extra staff in some subjects, notably



Distribution problems — penicillin exposed to heat and sunlight for sale in a market in Upper Volta.