

Embryo research

West German rules proposed

Bonn

THE long-awaited report of the West German interministerial commission on *in vitro* fertilization and related matters, set up in 1984 by the minister of research and technology, Heinz Riesenhuber, and the minister of justice, Hans A. Engelhard (FDU), was published last week (25 November). Part of the delicacy of the problem in West Germany arises because *in vitro* fertilization, even when carried out with the gametes of married couples, may be incompatible with the Basic Constitutional Law except when intended to lead to the birth of a child. The commission's proposals are to guide the drafting

UK money for AIDS

MR Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, this week announced that the British government would spend an extra £6.3 million on a package to combat the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). The money will be divided into five parts: £2.5 million for a national information campaign; £2.5 million for the Thames regional health authorities (75 per cent of the reported cases of AIDS in the United Kingdom are in London); £270,000 for six haemophilic counselling centres; £100,000 for training health professionals; and £750,000 for the Public Health Laboratory Service for testing blood samples for the AIDS virus.

The latest figures for the United Kingdom show that, of the 231 men and 10 women who have reported that they have the disease, 134 have died. A prediction of 1,837 new cases by 1988 was made at a meeting in London last week; the figure is higher than previous estimates because intravenous drug abusers are thought to be much more at risk than previously realized. The worry is that this group may be less amenable to public information campaigns than other "at risk" groups.

In a study published in the *Lancet* last month, it was reported that 38 per cent of serum samples from 106 Edinburgh drug abusers were positive for antibodies to the AIDS virus, with the proportions of men and women who registered seropositive about the same. Another report in the same issue analyses Centers of Disease Control data and shows that the relative risk of AIDS is four times greater for intravenous drug abusers than for homosexuals in the United States.

● The College of Health in London this week launched an addition to its Healthline service, which provides tapes of information on a range of medical subjects. Twelve new tapes give information on various aspects of AIDS; they can be heard by calling a London telephone number (1-980-4848) between 6 and 10 pm. Maxine Clarke

of new legislation in the next few months.

The commission, chaired by the former president of the Constitutional Court, Ernst Benda, voted 17 to two for the majority opinion, which says that the use of donor sperm for *in vitro* fertilization may be permissible in special circumstances; the commission recommends that children conceived in this way should have a right to be told, at the age of 16, of the identity of the sperm donor.

In general, the report says, the technique should be used only for married couples who would otherwise be unable to conceive a child. The commission would strictly prohibit the use of *in vitro* fertilization for unmarried women, and the "rent a womb" practice in which fertile women bear a child for others for payment.

The most contentious of the recommendations are those concerned with the use of embryos in scientific experiments. In general terms, the commission would forbid embryogenesis for the purposes of scientific observation, but would allow state authorities the right to grant exceptions for investigations likely to benefit "the progress of medical science". The commission's findings have been criticized for not drawing a clear line. However the freezing of human embryos would be forbidden except in exceptional circumstances.

On the cloning of human embryos, the commission unanimously recommends a total ban, suggesting that such procedures should be made criminal offences. On gene therapy, the commission argues that attempts to alter the genetic constitution of somatic cells are in principle the same as organ transplants, and should therefore be allowed, but that gene transfer within the germ line should be prohibited.

One of the most controversial issues triggered by the appearance of the commission's report is that which would allow the analysis of the individual genome as when, for example, employers may seek to determine whether applicants for jobs are constitutionally unfit to do them. Although such checks are at present impracticable, the commission has been criticized by the trades unions and SPD for approving what may one day be possible.

One of the dissenting voices on the commission, that of Walter Doerfler, professor of genetics at the University of Cologne, argues that the commission's "basic attitude" towards new developments in human embryology is "very negative" and that emotions are a poor foundation for "hurried" legislation.

The other dissenting opinion is that of Professor Peter Petersen from Hannover, a psychologist. He is opposed to *in vitro* fertilization on the grounds that the physicians involved "do not really know what they are doing".

Jürgen Neffe

Danube dams

Austria takes responsibility

AUSTRIA is to take over responsibility for the construction of the controversial hydroelectric plant at Nagymaros, in Hungary, the Austrian finance minister, Dr Franz Vranitzky, announced last week. The cost, estimated at 8,000 million Austrian schillings (US\$450 million), will be borne by a consortium of Austrian commercial banks, and will be repaid, over 20 years, by electricity from the new power station. The deal, however, has been criticized by Austrian environmentalists, who feel that the contract unloads environmental problems on to Hungary.

The Nagymaros dam is the lowest stage in a joint Czechoslovak-Austrian peak-hour generating scheme. A storage reservoir at Dunakiliti, on the Danube below Bratislava, will, at peak hours, feed a generating station at Gabčíkovo, through a diversion channel that will take the main flow of the river away from the international border through Slovak territory. The Nagymaros dam, on the scenic Danube bend between Esztergom and Budapest, in addition to producing electricity for Hungary (and now, for Austria), will serve as a catchment for surges from Gabčíkovo.

Many Hungarian environmentalists have opposed the scheme, on the grounds that it will destroy the Danube wetlands which are the habitat of rare flora and fauna, ruin the amenity value of the bend (Budapest's chief resort area) and, by lowering the water-table, cause a pollution threat to the water supply of Budapest. The Hungarian government, the environmentalists urged, should either get Prague to agree to drop the scheme, or else withdraw unilaterally. Both courses, however, proved impractical politically, and in mid-August the Hungarian government reiterated its commitment to the scheme, though now with a postponed timetable and assurances of careful ecological monitoring.

Ironically, virtually the same environmental objections that the Hungarians had to the Dunakiliti-Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros installations were raised by the Czechoslovak government against Austrian plans to build a similar storage reservoir and power station at Hainburg.

In November 1984, the Czechoslovak foreign ministry announced that if the Hainburg dam were built, Czechoslovakia would demand massive compensation for ecological damage. A month later, after a long battle with the Konrad Lorenz Volksbegehren, Austria's main environmental organization, the Austrian government halted land-clearing operations at Hainburg, and, it now appears, began negotiating for a financial stake in Nagymaros.

Vera Rich