

AIDS campaign gets off to a sticky start

- Controversial advice to blood donors
- British troops advised to take AIDS tests

London

As part of an unprecedented £20 million health education campaign, the 20 million homes in the United Kingdom will receive a leaflet through the post, within the next three weeks, outlining the dangers of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) and how to avoid its spread.

At the same time, there will be a stark television campaign conducted on both the commercial channels and those of the publicly funded networks of the British Broadcasting Corporation, drawing attention to the leaflets and their message "Don't die of ignorance". A special commercial has been made for cinema. The campaign illustrates the growing political pressure on the government from a medical profession that has become increasingly concerned about widespread ignorance of the disease and its frustration in being unable to find a cure.

That frustration was to provide acute embarrassment two days before the launch of the national education campaign. A statement by the British Medical Association (BMA) that those who had had more than one sexual partner in the past four years should refrain from donating blood — a voluntary act without financial reward in this country — caused much confusion and provoked hostility, principally from those trying to build up the resources of the national blood bank.

In response, the health officials, through the Department of Health and Social Security, were forced to play down the danger from AIDS on the eve of a campaign designed to do the opposite. A statement by the government's chief medical officer, Sir Donald Acheson, issued in the wake of the blood transfusion row, illustrated the dilemma.

The original statement read: "In only four of more than three million donations have antibodies to HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] been found in persons who deny being in any of the high-risk groups. This is striking evidence that

blood donors who are not in the high risk groups are very rarely infected with HIV." For that reason, men and women who were not in the main risk groups, even those who had more than one sexual partner in recent years, should continue volunteering to give blood, the statement continued. After reflection on this, the BMA withdrew its advice.

The emphasis of the educational campaign was different. Whatever we do, claims Norman Fowler, the Secretary of State for Social Services, it is likely that as many as 4,000 people in the United Kingdom will have died of AIDS in the United Kingdom by the end of the decade. Mr Fowler sees the object of the education campaign as stopping the spread of the

virus now and "for everyone to behave in a way which minimizes the chances of their being infected".

Despite the apparent contradictions in the two messages, the British medical authorities are seriously worried. The number of AIDS victims is to be published once a month and an interpretation of those statistics provided once a quarter.

One disturbing

trend is the proportion of incidence of the disease that appear to be clustered around the London area. Seventy per cent of the 293 deaths in Britain up to the end of last year were reported in the London area. Panic press reports predicted that London would become an 'AIDS capital' while more reasoned articles suggested that the cases had clustered because of the medical facilities available in the capital — the first AIDS ward in Britain is to be opened this week at the Middlesex Hospital in London.

The dangers of the spread of AIDS in sexually active groups has focused attention on the armed forces. The 600 soldiers of the first battalion of the Queen's Own Highlanders have been urged to take tests for AIDS having just returned from an eight-week spell in Kenya, where the disease is thought to be prevalent amongst prostitutes.

Bill Johnstone

Rifkin case thrown out

A US DISTRICT judge has thrown out of court an attempt by social activist Jeremy Rifkin to have declared illegal the US government's plans for regulating biotechnology. Rifkin has argued that the government's "Coordinated Framework" for regulation, published last June, was issued without adequate public participation, and that it lacked a required environmental impact statement. Judge Gerhard Gesell ruled Rifkin's complaint invalid on 22 December because the framework was a "far from successful effort to establish a common set of definitions" and because Rifkin's claim of injury rested on possible future government action.

Rifkin is undeterred by the apparent setback, arguing that the finding that the framework is not a formal "rulemaking" is a victory for his cause. It simply means, he says, that he must in future sue relevant agencies one by one, not *en masse*. □

DNA fingerprinting OK

DNA fingerprinting as a way to avoid or settle disputes over family relationships is given guarded approval by the UK Immigration Advisory Service in its annual report. The government-supported voluntary organization outlines the safeguards that it would like to see built into the application of the test to immigration disputes. Testing should not be compulsory, it says, but it would in most cases avoid the problems of trying to establish relationships by interviews. Blood samples would be collected overseas and sent for comparison with samples from relatives in Britain. □

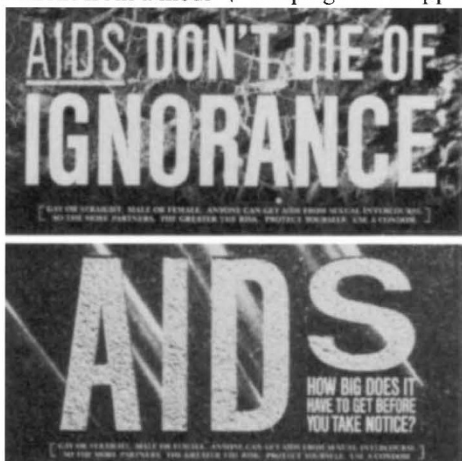
Space centre waiting

BRITAIN has no cash to award new development space contracts because of the government's reaction to a 15-year space plan, completed at the end of last summer by the British National Space Centre (BNSC), is more than two months overdue. The delay is causing considerable embarrassment at BNSC, which was formed about 15 months ago to co-ordinate the British space effort. BNSC officials need approval soon if Britain is to participate in international projects such as the European space plane Hermes.

BNSC hopes to be able to negotiate its contributions to the European projects at an ESA meeting in the spring, when preliminary discussions will lay the foundations for a full ministerial meeting in June. France has already announced increased support for space, bringing its total expenditure on space to £700 million — nearly seven times that of Britain. □

Correction

THE Reagan administration's proposed budget for the fiscal year beginning next October is \$1.024 million million (*Nature* 325, 96; 1987). □



The government's poster campaign has been less cryptic than the advertisements puzzling television viewers.