

Row in United States over schools AIDS education

- Controversial plans to include children
- Education and Health departments feud

Washington

A row has broken out in the White House over the proposed plan of the US Public Health Service (PHS) to prevent and control the spread of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) by a radical education programme that could include children under the age of eight.

The row coincides with the visit to the United States of Britain's health minister, Norman Fowler, who last week was similarly embroiled in criticism as he launched the United Kingdom's education campaign aimed at 18-year-olds and above.

The battle in the United States broke out last week at a meeting of the cabinet-level Domestic Policy Council. A representative of Education Secretary William Bennett criticized PHS for pursuing a "morally empty" approach to an educational programme on AIDS; at least two cabinet members are said to have expres-



Bennett accuses PHS of "moral emptiness".

sed outrage at the possibility of their 8- or 9-year-old child learning about anal intercourse at school.

When and how schoolchildren should be informed about AIDS has been a particularly contentious issue. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, one of PHS's agencies, are preparing school curricula for AIDS education, and the Surgeon General has urged that education should begin as early as possible. But according to an Education Department source, cabinet members are concerned that PHS has not involved them.

A memorandum dated 13 January from Jack Klenk of the Department of Education, to Gary Noble, PHS AIDS coordinator, details the Education Department's concern about his agency's plans. The memorandum urges PHS to include "avoid promiscuous sex" and "avoid prostitutes" as two basic messages and stresses the need for parental involvement in AIDS education. The programme should

say that children should not have sex, and that adult sexual behaviour should be based on "fidelity, commitment and maturity". The programme should also distinguish between heterosexual and homosexual sex, emphasizing that heterosexual sex within marriage is "what most Americans... consider the proper focus of human sexuality." PHS's suggestion that condoms will promote "safe sex" is also questioned. Klenk suggested the report could warn, "If your partner is infected, avoid sex with him or her like the plague".

Congress will also give PHS trouble. Although the administration has requested \$534 million for AIDS research and prevention in its 1988 budget, the administration plan to reduce by 700 the number of new competitive research grants available this year from the National Institutes of Health drew fire. Senator Edward Kennedy (Democrat, Massachusetts) accused PHS of "robbing Peter to pay Paul" with its plan to take \$334 million from the 1987 budget and shift it to 1988. David Baltimore, co-chairman of the National Academy of Sciences committee on a national strategy for AIDS, testified that taking money from other biomedical research to fund AIDS research is a mistake. Sheldon Wolff, the other co-chairman, argued that an effective education and public health campaign would cost \$1,000 million by 1991.

CDC, coordinating all PHS AIDS education activities, will make grants to state and local health authorities totalling \$30 million this year for demonstration, counselling and education programmes. A further \$11.2 million will go for developing health education curricula and providing grants for schools with AIDS education programmes. CDC also has a \$6 million budget for public information campaigns, including an AIDS hotline, information clearing-house and a possible \$1 million advertising campaign.

But Wolff argues that an effective campaign may cost more like \$50-60 million, the amount typically spent to launch a new laundry detergent.

Joseph Palca

• Azidothymidine, a drug that prolongs short-term survival of certain patients with AIDS, last week received a vote of confidence from an advisory panel to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The panel recommended that FDA approve the drug for commercial licence as a treatment for AIDS patients with certain opportunistic infections. □

Space shuttle setback

THE efforts of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and Morton Thiokol Inc. to redesign the space shuttle's solid rocket booster, which was the cause of the *Challenger* accident, are not going smoothly. A technical assessment conducted by a special panel of the National Research Council warns that unexpected results from the testing programme may delay returning the shuttle to service, because the planned February 1988 launch makes no allowances for undiscovered problems. The main problem so far is that a new "O"-ring seal, made of a different material supposed to have better low-temperature characteristics, is harmed by rust inhibitor used in the booster. NASA has therefore switched back to the original material, with heaters to ensure the seals do not get too cold. The panel is "concerned" about that development and various other changes that might introduce new critical failure points. □

Jeantet prizes awarded

SYDNEY Brenner, who was made a Companion of Honour in the British New Year's Honours list, is now also £340,000 better off as a result of his share in the 1987 awards of the Louis Jeantet Foundation for Medicine. Of this sum, £40,000 is a personal award and the rest is to be used to create research fellowships within the Medical Research Council's Molecular Genetics Unit. Sharing the prize are Professor Walter Gehring of the University of Basel's Biozentrum and Professor Dominique Stehelin of the Pasteur Institute in Lille, both of whom will use their £300,000 awards to initiate new research groups. □

New austerity in Cuba

CUBA's new austerity programme, aimed at cutting hard-currency imports, includes putting the country on a new, "healthier" diet. Measures announced by Fidel Castro include the elimination of afternoon snacks in all government offices, reduction of milk quotas for secondary school children and for workers' canteen meals, and cuts in sugar quotas to the food industry and in the sugar content of foods. □

Nuclear scientists lose out

ABOUT 170 British nuclear scientists must be content to be the poor relations of a European research project and be paid almost half of the incomes commanded by their colleagues from other community countries working on the same project. The British scientists failed to secure the backing of the European Court of Justice last week. The scientists, paid less than 50 per cent of the salaries of their Community colleagues by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, work on the Joint European Torus (JET) project at Culham in Oxfordshire and wanted salary parity. □