

French AIDS campaign launched at long last

- No compulsory screening but free tests on tap
- Campaign with 24 million brochures

Paris

A LONG-AWAITED national campaign to combat the spread of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) in France was outlined by health minister Michèle Barzach at a cabinet meeting on 24 June. With 1,632 cases of AIDS and an estimated 150,000–200,000 carriers of antibodies to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), France is top of the league in Europe and in fourth place among industrialized countries, yet has been conspicuously slow to announce national countermeasures. This is particularly ironic given the international kudos attracted by the Pasteur Institute for its early success in isolating the AIDS virus.

Barzach, a general practitioner, has based her proposals on a report, (*The Hospital and AIDS*), commissioned by her ministry last December and published at the beginning of June, from a multi-disciplinary working party headed by social services minister Jean Choussat. The four-point national campaign embraces prevention, care, research and international cooperation.

The government's proposals also follow the working party's recommendations in emphasizing that there will be no programme of compulsory screening for HIV antibodies. This provision has already attracted the ire of the extreme right-wing National Front party, whose AIDS policy, published the same day as Barzach's, advocates a mandatory twice-yearly screening of all French citizens at an estimated cost of FF16,000–25,000 million (£1,600 million) a year, the compulsory follow-up of all HIV-positive people and the institutionalization of confirmed AIDS cases.

Rather than a national screening campaign, which, it is argued, would be prohibitively expensive as well as ineffective, Barzach plans to make free, voluntary and anonymous screening widely available at special centres throughout France. There will also be a concerted information campaign, directed especially at young people and health workers, which will be launched in the cinema, on television, through posters and with 24 million brochures distributed to everyone on the electoral list. The cost of the brochures, estimated at FF20 million, will be borne by the post office.

Other preventive measures include the systematic, anonymous screening of blood whenever a sample is taken from a

patient, the supply of syringes without prescription and freedom for manufacturers to advertise condoms.

With the search for an AIDS vaccine declared a cause "of national importance" to which the public is invited to donate, Barzach intends to provide an extra FF100 million (£10 million) for research into new methods of treatment and diagnosis and the development of a vaccine. Meanwhile, eleven centres will be opened in October in Paris and other French cities for the care and monitoring of AIDS patients. In addition, it is intended that general hospitals should create small AIDS units, with up to 20 beds and with an emphasis on day-care where possible.

With no official government strategy to combat the spread of AIDS until this week, one department (county) had already drawn up its own plan. The Alpes-Maritime region of southern France, where both AIDS and National Front membership are relatively widespread, a phenomenon attributed to a high immigrant population and widespread drug abuse, intends to make screening for HIV antibodies mandatory and to create a register of carriers of the AIDS virus, ostensibly to permit effective epidemiological analysis.

This move, which could contravene civil rights laws, has been condemned by the health ministry. Alpes-Maritime officials, who had hoped to rely on a proviso in the constitution that authorizes local action to control the spread of venereal diseases, have been told by Barzach that AIDS does not come under this category. The minister is also adamant that a coordinated national policy, not a series of local initiatives, is what is required.

Prevention is likely to be more difficult in France than in some other countries. With a predominantly Catholic population, France has an uphill struggle ahead to make the use of condoms widespread. The director of one leading French manufacturer of surgical goods has estimated that only 17 per cent of families practising some form of contraception choose the condom, compared with over 70 per cent in Japan, which has one of the lowest rates of AIDS cases in the world.

The French episcopacy has recently found itself in an extraordinary double-bind. As a prophylactic against AIDS, use of the condom is not discouraged by the Church, but as a contraceptive it remains proscribed.

Peter Coles

NASA tests too hasty?

Washington

A SPECIAL panel of the National Research Council evaluating the redesign of the space shuttle's booster rockets last week issued an interim report critical of NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) for failing to pursue alternatives for certain critical aspects of the design "with sufficient vigour". By its neglect, the panel warns, NASA is risking even greater delays in its timetable.

One particular concern is the procedure for testing the new design for the booster joints. Because several test firings will not be feasible, the joints will be tested by intentionally introducing flaws to see if they fail as in the Challenger accident. The panel is worried that the intended flaws may reveal problems for which NASA has no solutions.

A full-scale full-duration test firing of the newly designed joints is planned for 23 August. J.P.

This week's prizes

London

THE architect of India's Green Revolution, Dr M. S. Swaminathan, is the first recipient of a new \$200,000 General Foods World Food Prize for his contribution to improving the world's food supply. Swaminathan, director general of the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines, has worked to improve production of rice and wheat in India and Pakistan.

The \$300,000 Kyoto Prize for Basic Sciences has been awarded to Jan Oort, a Dutch astronomer who described the phenomenon of spinning galaxies 60 years ago. The prize honours his outstanding contribution to the deeper understanding of the universe. K.J.

University for Tanzania

London

THE Tanzanian Party leader, Mwalimu Nyerere, has asked the Soviet Union to help establish a university of chemistry and technology at Mbeya in western Tanzania. A college of technology is already being built there, with Soviet assistance, but now the Tanzanians feel that it would be "even better" to convert it into a full-scale university. V.R.

Plant skills lacking

London

A SHORTAGE of skilled scientists at the postdoctoral level could seriously hamper the efforts of British companies to compete in the field of biotechnology. So says a report from the Science and Engineering Research Council, which cites plant molecular technology and bioprocess technology as areas of particular shortage. The report is discussed on page 96 of this issue. C.W.