

Protests oust science at AIDS conference

- US immigration policy lambasted
- Activists take to the podium

San Francisco

THE politics of the AIDS epidemic and the growing involvement of AIDS activists in determining the course of clinical trials of new drugs dominated discussion at the Sixth International Conference on AIDS which ended in San Francisco last week. Few major scientific announcements were made, strengthening suspicions that the days of the conference as a forum for presenting new research are numbered.

Politics were apparent at the opening ceremony in a display of anger over government policy that makes it hard for people infected with the HIV virus to obtain visas to enter the United States — a policy which caused almost 100 organizations to boycott the conference. Led by Peter Staley, a representative of the AIDS activist group ACT-UP, thousands of delegates stood and chanted "300,000 dead from AIDS — where is George?"

Unlike the heads of state of countries that had hosted the conference in previous years, US President George Bush declined to appear at the opening ceremony. Instead he was to be found attending a fund-raising event for Senator Jesse Helms who — as it happens — sponsored the offending amendment barring entry to anyone infected with HIV.

Although events inside the conference centre hinted at a new era of cooperation between researchers and AIDS activists, outside, demonstrations by those frustrated by the failure of government to stem the AIDS epidemic continued throughout the week. A particular target was the bias against the inclusion of women in clinical trials (see next page). Arrests were made as groups of protesters attempted to block traffic near the conference centre.

Inside the centre, the only major disturbance greeted the closing speech from Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan. Seen by activists as a representative of the White House, his speech was drowned by whistles and chants. Earlier, a satellite session chaired by Jerome Groopman of Harvard University Medical School had to be postponed when it was invaded by protesters. Otherwise the conference was a testament to the organizers' efforts to integrate activists by giving them speaking slots.

The involvement of groups such as ACT-UP also reflects a growing willingness of researchers to listen to activist arguments about priorities in AIDS research. Addressing delegates at a session organized by activists, ACT-UP's

spokesman Mark Harrington spoke of his "partnership" with Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, who has been heavily involved in coordinating the clinical trials of AIDS drugs; Fauci has promised ACT-UP places on a research advisory committee.

Many scientists are also willing to acknowledge the role of activists in speeding the process of drug approval by the US Food and Drug Administration and in persuading them to endorse a "parallel track" scheme whereby HIV-positive individuals and patients with AIDS who are not eligible to enroll in clinical trials can obtain access to experimental drugs.

ACT-UP released its new agenda at San Francisco, giving an account of how clinical trials could be speeded up further and how the collection of data on experimental drugs could be facilitated using a "middle track" scheme. Whereas "parallel track" simply distributes experimental drugs to patients as soon as they clear preliminary safety tests, "middle track" would enable manufacturers to gather a limited amount of data on a drug's toxicity and effectiveness at different doses by allowing them to monitor the progress of individuals not enrolled in the official clinical trial.

Conflicts over the key question of how to balance careful science with the patient's need for rapid treatment did not vanish altogether. A heated debate erupted at a plenary session on clinical trials when Martin Delaney of Project Inform, a group that advocates unofficial community-based research, unveiled the startling, but sketchy, results of an "underground" trial — completed in record time — of Compound Q, the most controversial of all experimental AIDS drugs.

Delaney's results, obtained in collaboration with San Francisco physician Larry Waites, show apparent dramatic rises in the T4 cell counts of 8 out of 46 patients after treatment with the drug. In the panel discussion that followed, Delaney's talk, acclaimed as a triumph by activists, met with a barrage of criticism. First with his gloves off was Arnold Relman, editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, who accused Delaney's organization of practising "black magic".

Criticizing Delaney for not releasing detailed data on the 46 patients, Relman called him "irresponsible" for "making such claims without publishing your data"

A second agent?

THE most controversial announcement of the conference came from Luc Montagnier, leader of the French group that first discovered the AIDS virus at the Institut Pasteur, who claimed that he had isolated a new infectious agent associated with the development of AIDS.

The agent is a mycoplasma, a small bacterium-like organism, which Montagnier says may enhance the cell-killing properties of the HIV virus, thus quickening the decline of the immune system. Montagnier's claim is based on his group's isolation of mycoplasmas from the blood of AIDS patients put together with observations that coinfection with mycoplasmas of HIV-infected cells in culture increases virus proliferation. Addition of an antibiotic that kills mycoplasmas slows virus production, suggesting, says Montagnier, that certain antibiotics may have some effect in slowing the progress of AIDS. His group has already begun a small clinical trial.

Montagnier's claims were met with scepticism. In a question-and-answer session he was asked for more details about the way in which mycoplasmas accelerate virus proliferation and whether he could be sure the blood samples had not become contaminated with mycoplasma in the laboratory. Montagnier argued strongly against his results being purely an artefact of laboratory contamination but agreed that he could not rule out that the effect of mycoplasmas on virus production came through some non-specific action, such as stimulation of cytokine production. **D.C.**

or subjecting them to peer review. James Kahn, who is supervising government trials of Compound Q at San Francisco General Hospital, advised caution in interpreting the data, noting that two patients died last year after treatment with Compound Q.

At a press conference following the session, Daniel Hoth, director of the NIH's AIDS research effort, emphasized the need to move as quickly as possible with clinical trials, but cautioned of the dangers of following "drug de jour" fads. But, regardless of the scientific merit of the Compound Q study, its description at the conference marked a turning point in the debate over when people suffering from a disease should have a say in a research agenda intended to help them.

That debate may not be completed in the United States. Harvard University, chosen for the conference in 1992, will withdraw its support if immigration policy is not changed. The International AIDS Society which sponsors the conference has reportedly given Congress until this autumn to repeal the law or find the conference cancelled. **David Concar**