

Whistle-blowers wait for overbilling verdict

Rex Dalton, San Francisco

A federal judge will decide next week whether payments should be made to whistle-blowers who expose improper government billings made by public medical schools in the United States.

The San Francisco judge will hold a hearing on 16 August to determine whether four whistle-blowers should share part of \$22.5 million paid by the University of California to settle lawsuits alleging that government health-care programmes were overbilled by hospitals at the university's five medical schools.

The four women filed the lawsuits several years ago under the federal False Claims Act, which permits a whistle-blower to receive 15–25% of the funds the gov-

ernment recovers after exposure of fraud or abuse.

The lawsuits alleged fraudulent billing practices on behalf of University of California faculty, who may have been involved in research, consulting or other activities when they were supposed to be supervising patient care by training physician residents.

The case will be watched closely by researchers at US medical schools. A decision supporting continued close government scrutiny of billing practices will be viewed by some physicians as inhibiting their ability to conduct research. But some non-physician researchers may welcome such scrutiny, which they think serves to level the playing field for all researchers in the medical schools.



The US Department of Justice is asking the judge to deny payment to the whistle-blowers, who are seeking \$4.5 million of the settlement money that the university paid earlier this year to the government.

If the judge decides the whistle-blowers should not receive a portion of the settlement, both sides agree that the decision could prevent any future false-claims lawsuits against public medical schools. Private universities are not affected by the case.

Stephen Meagher, a San Francisco attorney representing two of the whistle-blowers, says the government has turned its back on his clients after they exposed extensive improprieties at the university. "The government wants people to expose abuse," he says. "But they don't want to pay them; it won't work."

Federal attorneys say the government does not have to share the settlement with the whistle-blowers because of a US Supreme Court decision last year limiting False Claims Act lawsuits against public entities, such as state universities.

Government audits of a five-year period to 1998 found that more than \$200 million in excess payments were made to the University of California medical schools, a university attorney said. But the university disputes the audit conclusions, and admitted no wrongdoing in agreeing to pay the \$22.5 million.

Late last year, the government discussed a \$1 million payment to the whistle-blowers, Meagher says, but halted negotiations shortly after the Republican administration of President George W. Bush took office. Some Republicans have voiced scepticism about rewarding whistle-blowers and their lawyers for exposing the misuse of public funds, but they have been unable to repeal the False Claims Act.

The Association of American Medical Colleges, which represents the medical schools, asserts that its members have been unfairly singled out for government audits.

Soccer robots get the ball rolling

Quirin Schiermeier

The fifth world championships for autonomous soccer-playing robots kicked off in Seattle, Washington, last week at an international meeting of artificial intelligence (AI) researchers. A record number of 120 teams from 25 countries will compete in the RoboCup, which is being held in the United States for the first time.

Soccer is the simplest of sports. But the number of human decisions, physical forces and interactions between them — its number of degrees of freedom — is immense. So it is no surprise that AI researchers and software engineers have homed in on the world's most popular sport as a promising arena for their work.

The tournament will provide them with ample opportunity to demonstrate, compare and improve the complex coordination, navigation and decision-making abilities

of different robots. And scientists and spectators alike can get a kick out of it.

The navigational and cognitive skills needed to play soccer are also useful for developing robots to save humans from dangerous situations such as fires or earthquakes, the researchers say. Prototypes of rescue robots and two-legged robots will be on show in Seattle.

Whereas the first generations of robots could only recognize obstacles and get out of their way, today's intelligent machines can perform relatively complex tasks requiring division of labour, make informed choices, and learn from their mistakes.

Whether robots will ever play soccer with any real proficiency remains to be seen. But the organizers of the RoboCup claim that a team of robots will beat the human world champions by the year 2050. ■



Booting up: the University of Freiburg team (left), which won the German Open in June, is defending its world title at RoboCup 2001 in Seattle — where improving artificial intelligence is the goal.