AIDS scandal indicts French government

■ Blood test delayed to help French industry

■ Decision was made at the highest levels

CHOOSING economics and nationalism over public health, French government officials delayed the approval of a US AIDS test for five months in 1985 so that a French test could be released first, according to a report of a government investigation released last week.

The report, by Michel Lucas, the government inspector general for social affairs, was prompted by three years of lawsuits by the families of French haemophiliacs who had died of AIDS, and by the protest resignation last summer of Michel Garretta, director of the national blood transfusion centre. Based on internal documents and transcripts of government meetings, the Lucas report concludes that even though officials knew that haemophiliacs and other blood recipients would probably be infected by AIDS-contaminated blood supplies during the delay, they decided it was more important to prevent a US drug company from monopolizing the French test market than to speed the screening process by half a year.

Acting on instructions from Edmund Hervé, the secretary of state for health, the National Health Laboratory held up the blood test application of US-based Abbott Laboratories from 2 March 1985, when the test was approved in the United States, to 24 July, a month after a test by the French company Diagnostic Pasteur was approved, according to the Lucas report. Of the 3,000 haemophiliacs listed in France in 1985, 1,200 are now seropositive and 185 are dead. It will probably never be known how many of those were infected

during that five-month period.

Describing a trail of mistakes and deliberate subterfuge that Lucas suggests may lead all the way to the office of then-Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, the report reveals that government officials disregarded reports of contaminated blood supplies and growing infection statistics in order to give the test produced by Diagnostic Pasteur a chance to monopolize the domestic market.

According to a transcript of a meeting on 9 May of the cabinet, a representative of the health ministry noted that "the American firm Abbott and Diagnostic Pasteur [the marketing arm of the Pasteur Institute] are both ready to file an application to the national health laboratory. But it seems that Abbott is already looking at the national market and is starting an intensive promotion of their products at French blood transfusion centres."

"It is necessary to add that at this time that the American test has a considerable trump card; its price is half as expensive as the French product," the representative continued. "If the Diagnostic Pasteur test is not adopted in the blood transfusion centres now, it is clear there will not be a French market for the product and consequently there will not be an international market. A decision must be made rapidly, since the National Health Laboratory can not hold back Abbott's application very long beyond 13 May, the legal limit, without running the risk of contentious appeals."

Much of the emphasis on the econom-

ics — rather than the health risks — of AIDS can be explained by the fact that, even as late as mid-1985, French health officials were underestimating the severity of the threat. At the same 9 May meeting, the representative of the ministry of health noted that "cases of post-transfusion AIDS are generally rare — fewer than the number of post-transfusion hepatitis cases." Therefore, "the introduction [of a blood test] will not significantly affect the [spread of] the illness since only a few cases will be avoided. One is only going to arouse the worries of a lot of people ... without doing much to [halt] the evolution of the disease."

Officials were also concerned about the cost of screening all blood donations. At the meeting, the representative from the health ministry declared that he "was opposed to [covering] the price of the test with health insurance, because of the large sums involved." He estimated that on the basis of four million donors, at FF50 a test, the cost of the testing would be more than FF200 million (\$35 million).

In the report, Lucas suggests that officials were guilty of an intentional disregard for public safety, if not outright conspiracy. "I cannot believe that the [health officials] willingly distributed death, but it is necessary to recognize that they distributed products that they knew caused death in 10 per cent of all cases." In 1985, French scientists were still estimating that only 10 per cent of all seropositive individuals would develop AIDS.

Although some scientists tried to persuade the health ministry of the dangers of unscreened blood, "the importance of this message of alarm does not seem to have been perceived," Lucas notes.

The Lucas report will now go to current health minister Bruno Durieux, who is expected to turn it over to the justice ministry to decide whether to start legal proceedings. **Christopher Anderson**

"AIDSgate" — a chronology

9 January 1985 — In an internal memorandum to the health ministry, François Pinon, of the Cochin Hospital in Paris, warns that "the possibility of AIDS transmission by blood transfusion is certain."

11 February — Abbott Laboratories files an application for approval of its AIDS blood test in France, following a similar application in the United States.

28 February — Diagnostic Pasteur files for approval of its blood test in France.

2 March — Abbott's blood test is approved in the United States.

12 March — Jacques Roux of the Necker Hospital in Paris informs the health ministry that a review of the hospital's blood bank records has revealed that "a person with AIDS has given blood 20 times between 1979 and 1984." A few days later, the Paris-based

Cochin Hospital tells the health ministry that a search of its records has shown that 6 per cent of blood donations appear to have been made by people who have since been found to be carrying the AIDS virus. In an internal memorandum to the French director general of health, Cochin officials report that "it is probable that all the blood products prepared from pools of Parisian blood donors are currently contaminated."

25 April — Robert Netter, director of the French National Health Laboratory, writes to the secretary of state for health, "It doesn't seem possible to delay the American test much longer without risking an appeal [by Abbott] to the Council of State charging abuse of power. Under these conditions, I suggest granting an immediate approval for Pasteur and delaying Abbott to 13 May 1985" — the latest date that the

Laboratory could legally hold the application without taking action.

9 May — In a cabinet meeting chaired by François Gros, health adviser to then-Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, officials decide that the Abbott application should be delayed longer still. Michel Garretta, director of the national centre for blood transfusion, raises a solitary protest: "Given that three months of delay, more or less, means the death of 5 or 10 haemophiliacs...it is absolutely urgent to interrupt the illness now" by beginning a screening process. But the cabinet overrules him.

21 June — The Diagnostic Pasteur blood test is approved.

24 July — France finally approves the Abbott test, some five months after it was approved in the United States and six months after it was submitted to French authorities. **C.A.**