

# Europe tightens rules that govern homeopathic products

**Munich.** The European Parliament has tightened its supervision of homeopathic products to bring them into line with a new system that will permit the free movement of medicaments within the European Communities (EC).

The move modifies last year's controversial directive, which would have exempted all products claimed to be homeopathic from the strict regulations applied to the licensing of conventional pharmaceuticals. Under the new procedures only products of very high dilution (1 in  $10^4$ ) will qualify for the proposed simplified registration. No claims for special medical indications will be allowed.

However, the change is not sufficient to satisfy the European Federation of Pharmacology Societies, which says that the directive lends credibility to homeopathy by referring to very dilute preparations as homeopathic 'medicines'. Fearful of the increasing power of the alternative-medicine lobby in Europe, the federation would like to substitute the more neutral term 'homeopathic preparations'.

With or without the amendment, EC member states have less than a year to introduce the directive into their national legislation; full harmonization of licensing laws for medicaments is to be achieved by 1995. This means that some countries, such as Greece, will have to change laws that forbid the import of homeopathic products while others, in which such products are heavily promoted, will have to tone down claims for homeopathic 'remedies'.

Interest in homeopathy varies widely, with an estimated 40 per cent of the French, 18 per cent of Belgians and 10 per cent of Italians using homeopathic products regularly. On the other hand, homeopathy is rarely practised in Denmark.

Control of the products also varies widely: in Portugal, Norway and Belgium, for example, doctors are free to prescribe homeopathic products, while the Netherlands this year introduced legislation, in line with the EC directive, prohibiting any claim for a specific therapeutic indication.

Pharmacologists are also concerned about the growing pressures to incorporate homeopathy and other unconventional medical practices into mainstream medicine. Several health insurance companies offer policies

covering alternative medicine, and alternative practices are beginning to influence training and research.

In Germany, where 22,000 homeopathic products are registered using criteria less rigorous than those applied to its 34,000 conventional drugs, medical schools are now obliged to test students on their knowl-

edge of alternative medicine. Organizations that had previously refused to cooperate are now beginning to work more closely with the centralized examination board in selecting questions.

In Switzerland, the national funding agency

set aside SFr6 million (US\$4.5 million) in 1990 for a five-year programme of research into alternative medicine. At the same time, two Swiss practitioners of alternative medicine received support from the European Commission to coordinate the results of European research projects, which may or may not receive public funding. When Finland challenged the approach as "unscientific", a compromise was reached and an 'unconventional medicine project' was created under the direction of Klaus von Berlepsch, deputy director of clinical research at Hoffmann-LaRoche in Basel.

Although commission coordination ('COST') programmes do not provide funding for research — instead, they pay for travel and publications — the programme estimates that ECU21 million (US\$27 million) is likely to be spent on national research projects in the next five years. In the United States, the National Institutes of Health have been ordered by Congress to begin a \$2-million-a-year programme to assess the value of unconventional medical practices (see *Nature* 358, 5; 1992).

Although the European Federation of Pharmacology Societies acknowledges the popularity of homeopathy in parts of Europe and the inherent safety of products of very high dilution, it does not want the European Parliament to appear to endorse the unproven belief that homeopathic preparations may be beneficial. This is particularly important at a time when such countries as Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Russia are seeing a surge in popularity of cheap alternative medicines.

Alison Abbott

# Royal Society wants extra powers for science office

**London.** The Royal Society has proposed that the Office of Science and Technology (OST) should be given a budget separate from the annual allocation for science to address Britain's international science commitments and oversee domestic research issues. The recommendations come in the society's report, *The Future of the Science Base\**, which was delayed because of the creation of OST earlier this year.

Although only a modest amount is proposed — £100 million (US\$180 million) to oversee domestic research and a similar amount to meet the country's international subscriptions (£105.8 million for 1992–93) — the Royal Society feels that the money could have a considerable effect. "It would help the UK gain a substantially better return from European Communities research, in particular, and international science more generally, and better promote science and technology within the UK", the report says. The OST is considering the idea.

International subscriptions are usually paid in currencies other than sterling, and fluctuations in the exchange rates can heavily influence the real cost to the research councils. Having OST take responsibility for these funds would free the research councils from unexpected drains on their budgets and make planning more secure.

The move also acknowledges the political element in international collaborations and makes government accountable for any influence it might exert. Researchers complain that they have sometimes been unable to exercise scientific judgements — even to the extent of pulling out of collaborations — because of objections from the Foreign Office and other government departments.

On top of the subscriptions, which would be transferred from the science vote to the OST budget, the Royal Society proposes that new money should be found to address issues vital to the national research and development infrastructure that transcend individual departmental responsibilities (biotechnology and biodiversity are examples), and to match research programmes supported by the European Communities (EC).

Britain is unusual among European countries in that research budgets are reduced by the amount of money obtained from the EC: elsewhere, the funds are considered additional. As well as being a disincentive to EC collaboration, the policy means that researchers working with EC money are progressively drawn away from British research priorities.

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