

# UN AIDS chief will 'mobilize' commitment . . .

**Paris.** Peter Piot, the current director of research and intervention development of the World Health Organization's (WHO)'s Global Programme on AIDS, was this week appointed head of the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS, which is scheduled to begin in 1996.

Piot was appointed by the heads of the six UN agencies that will take part in the new programme: the Children's Fund (UNICEF), Development Programme (UNDP), Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and Population Fund (UNFPA), and the World Bank and WHO. His appointment was confirmed on Monday by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the UN secretary general.

Piot says his priority will be to "mobilize" political commitment to preventing AIDS. Such support has fallen over the past few years, he says, because of a combination of the economic recession and "AIDS fatigue", the latter caused partly by the absence of the predicted explosion of heterosexually transmitted AIDS in developing countries.

Maintaining the political momentum created by the recent AIDS summit will be the first task, according to Piot, who says this involves winning over not only heads of states but also the research community, non-governmental organizations and community leaders. The fact that there will be one channel for donor aid will make a big difference but the "acid test" of the new programme will be how it performs at the "country level".

Indeed, there is concern that the new programme may simply amount to cosmetic changes and that it will lack a coherent strategy. Piot argues, however, that there is no "magic bullet" against AIDS and describes the fact that the various UN agencies have very disparate ideas about the best approach to tackle AIDS as "no bad thing", providing that they are coordinated.

Piot says that the research priorities of

the new programme will include vaccine trials, vaginal microbicides and behaviour (see *Nature* 372, 308; 1994).

The choice of Piot has been welcomed by AIDS researchers. "He has a great track record, they couldn't have made a better choice," says one. But they are more sceptical of his chances of success, given the

political forces he will have to contend with.

In particular, although WHO does an excellent job in global epidemiological research, one AIDS researcher argues that the diplomatic imperatives that constrain WHO and other UN agencies render them "largely irrelevant" to the urgent and coherent action needed against AIDS. **Declan Butler**

## . . . as tighter research links urged

**San Francisco.** AIDS researchers need to work more closely with those providing services and developing policy, according to a task-force on the HIV epidemic set up by the city and county of San Francisco, where the disease first became apparent more than 10 years ago. "The kind of research that is going on does not necessarily help prevent infections," says Mitchell Katz, director of the AIDS Office of the San Francisco Department of Health and a member of the study group.

The joint task-force was made up of 25 people from a wide range of AIDS service organizations and city offices, and had been asked to evaluate HIV services and prevention in San Francisco.

In a report to Mayor Frank Jordan and the Board of Supervisors, the group has emphasized the importance of research in all aspects of the city's response to the epidemic. But it has urged researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, to work with community-based organizations and the Department of Public Health to set research priorities, disseminate information and raise research funding.

Most research in the United States occurs independently of the delivery of care, and there is very little interaction between the two, says Katz. "That is a major failing of our system. It results in the research being less pertinent to the policy-makers and the people who are offering the services."

Although there is a great deal of research on ways of predicting sero-conversion, Katz says there is relatively little study of the efficacy of attempts at prevention, even though this would be far more useful to the providers of HIV services.

The task-force has recommended more research into behaviour associated with HIV transmission, rather than emphasizing risk groups. Population-specific studies should give priority to women, ethnic minorities and young people, without reducing the focus on gay men, its report says.

Michael S. Ascher, acting chief of the California State Virus Laboratory in Berkeley, agrees with the task-force that interaction between researchers and service providers is critical for studies to be relevant to the community.

The task-force said that researchers need to work harder to address the changing demographics of AIDS as more women, homeless people and drug users become infected with HIV. In particular, it urges researchers to investigate woman-to-woman transmission of the virus, to develop technology to prevent oral-vaginal transmission, and to evaluate treatment protocols designed for men to see if they are appropriate for women.

In recent years, the National Institutes of Health have begun to require the inclusion of women and minorities in clinical trials. The National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Disease has particularly emphasized women and drug users in its vaccine preparedness programme to recruit a cohort for potential large-scale HIV vaccine trials.

Partly because those with AIDS are living longer than in the past, members of the task-force also asked researchers to look more closely at the merits of non-Western medical traditions. "The thrust of research is for scientific knowledge, not consumer-driven," said Daniel Toleran, chair of the Filipino Task Force on AIDS and a clinical social worker at the University of California, San Francisco.

The task-force concluded that lack of funding, the changing nature of the epidemic and the increasing need for long-term services are threatening the quality of San Francisco's system of AIDS care.

**Sally Lehrman**

## MPG outlines new plans for eastern Germany

**Munich.** The Max-Planck Gesellschaft (MPG), Germany's leading basic research organization, plans to have up to 20 new research institutes fully operational in the new *Länder* by the end of the century, according to its president, Hans Zacher.

Addressing the MPG's annual meeting in Berlin earlier this month, Zacher said that the MPG aims to boost its activities in the east to the level of the west within a decade of reunification. Eight institutes have already been opened in the new *Länder*.

The organization will also support, for five years, 28 research groups — all but one within universities — to help boost the quality of their research, which had declined significantly during the commu-

nist years.

MPG will provide temporary support for seven new social sciences centres in the new *Länder*, planning to transfer these to universities within four years. It will also open eastern branches of the Garching-based institutes for extraterrestrial physics and plasma physics.

The money for these projects will come out of savings made by limiting the number of emeritus positions offered to three out of four scientists who become eligible for them, and limiting the number of research groups in the old *Länder*. The latter have a fixed life span and savings can therefore be realized relatively quickly.

Alison Abbott