

Documents confirm delays in Japanese HIV blood scandal

European deal under fire from US critics over reactor fuel

Tokyo. Japan's new minister of health, Naoto Kan, last week released more evidence confirming his ministry's responsibility in the infection of thousands of Japanese haemophiliacs with HIV through contaminated blood products in the 1980s.

Extracts of documents show that in July 1983, the ministry considered, as an emergency measure, importing from the United States blood coagulants that had been heat-treated to kill viruses. But it quickly rejected the idea, partly to protect the domestic blood product industry, which was behind US and European companies in the development of such products.

Memoranda concerning the proposed emergency imports were found in a 145-page file belonging to Atsuaki Gunji, who in 1983 headed the ministry's division in charge of policy on AIDS and blood products. The file and other documents on AIDS were discovered in January in a three-day search ordered by Kan after the ministry had claimed for years, both in court and in the Diet (Japanese parliament), that the documents could not be found.

Much of the information contained in the extracts was reported in a television documentary broadcast by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) in 1994 (see *Nature* **367**, 584: 1994). But this is the first confirmation by the ministry that emergency imports were considered.

The extracts show that on 4 July 1983 an AIDS study group set up by Gunji discussed importing on an emergency basis heat-treated products from the US company Baxter through its Japanese affiliate Nihon Travanol. According to Gunji's memoranda, the group also considered banning the use of blood plasma imported from the United States — and used in more than 90 per cent of Japanese-made blood products at the time — in the manufacture of non-heat-treated blood coagulants.

But the extracts also show that the ministry was concerned about the possible impact of such action on the domestic blood product industry. A week later, it decided not to make emergency imports, and not to ban the use of US blood plasma. As a result, it was another two years before heat-treated products were approved by the ministry for use in Japan. In the interim, many of Japan's haemophiliacs were infected with HIV.

Gunji, now a professor at Tokyo University, told ministry officials in a written statement last week that he had realized the possible danger of AIDS early in 1983, and that was why he set up the study group. But at the time he thought the infective power of the agent causing AIDS, which had not then been isolated, was low, and that because

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Kan bows to a relative of a patient who died after treatment with HIV-infected blood.

most AIDS cases were in homosexuals, other factors were involved in infection. He therefore felt that the benefits of non-heat-treated coagulants outweighed the risks.

Echoing comments made to *Nature* in 1988, he also pointed out that Japan was being criticized internationally at the time for consuming a large share of the world's blood supplies. In the heat-treatment process, yields of the coagulant are far less than 100 per cent, and Gunji was concerned that use of such products could lead to further criticism of Japan. (In 1988, he also explained his concern that altered proteins in the heat-treated products might set off disastrous antibody reactions in patients.)

Despite these reservations, it was said to have been Gunji who suggested the emergency import of heat-treated products. But, according to the NHK documentary, he gave up the idea in the face of opposition from members of the study group, in particular its head — and Gunji's former professor — Takeshi Abe, who is now vice-president of Teikyo University. In a rare television interview last week, Abe claimed he did not have the power to influence the ministry's decision and was just one member of the study group.

The ministry has also confirmed NHK's 1994 report that in June 1983, just as the study group was being set up, Baxter notified Gunji of the recall of some blood products suspected of being contaminated with blood from an AIDS patient. But, for reasons that have yet to be clearly explained, Gunji did not tell the study group.

The ministry is continuing its internal investigations. Meanwhile, haemophiliacs and their supporters are demanding a thorough independent investigation to establish who decided to drop the idea of emergency imports and why.

David Swinbanks

Washington. A nuclear cooperation agreement between the United States and Europe has come under attack from a broad coalition of US lobby groups as a threat to nuclear non-proliferation.

Paul Leventhal of the Nuclear Control Institute in Washington DC, describes the agreement, which was negotiated last year by the United States and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), as "opening the door to the trafficking of nuclear materials", as it will allow European nations to store and reprocess plutonium and highly enriched materials originating in the United States.

The United States stopped reprocessing plutonium in the mid-1970s, and has since been trying to encourage its allies in Europe and Japan to do the same. In passing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act (NNPA) in 1978, Congress sought to impose tougher controls on the allies' use of nuclear materials of US origin. But successive US administrations have regarded good relations with the allies as more important than the strict enforcement of this law.

The agreement with Euratom covers the United States' collaboration with all members of the European Union on civil nuclear research and technology. Although many EU countries perform civil nuclear research of their own, Euratom has responsibility for safeguarding the handling of nuclear materials in all of the countries.

Critics of the agreement hope to attach conditions to its ratification at a hearing of the US Senate's Governmental Affairs committee this week. They will argue that the agreement signed by the Clinton administration breaches the NNPA by failing to retain "consent rights" for the United States over nuclear materials of US origin. The ranking minority member of that committee, Senator John Glenn (Democrat, Ohio), sponsored the NNPA in the 1970s, and is a champion of nuclear non-proliferation.

The critics are also angry with Euratom for negotiating with Russia to buy highly enriched uranium for its research reactors. They say that these negotiations are a direct response to the US embargo on exporting highly enriched uranium, and that the United States should withhold its own agreement with Euratom until the Euratom-Russia deal is blocked.

Groups opposing the agreement include the Nuclear Control Institute, Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council. They hope to win support from conservatives who feel that the Clinton administration has taken too soft a line with America's European allies in negotiating the agreement.

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