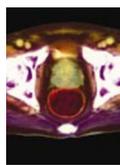
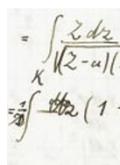


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Arrest of AIDS activist underlines China's impending HIV crisis

David Cyranoski, Tokyo

The furtive arrest of a prominent Chinese AIDS activist late last month may have been intended to quell public debate about China's AIDS crisis. But the disappearance of Wan Yanhai — best known for his harsh critique of the government's response to AIDS — has instead cast a spotlight on China's handling of its growing HIV problem.

HIV and AIDS have been spreading at an alarming rate in China. At a press briefing on 6 September, Qi Xiaoqi, director general of the Department of Disease Control at China's health ministry, admitted that the number of people in the country infected with HIV could reach one million by the end of this year — up from 850,000 at the end of 2001.

But many experts think this is an underestimate. A report issued by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in June gave estimates for 2001 of up to 1.5 million and warned that the number of people infected could reach 10 million by 2010.

In much of China, HIV has been spread by sexual contact or through intravenous drug use. But the soaring rates of infection in



Like many in China, 8-year-old Zhang Xiaqing was infected with HIV from a blood transfusion.

central inland provinces such as Anhui and Henan — where some villages have reported HIV infection in up to 80% of adults, according to the UNAIDS report — have largely been caused by the presence of the virus in unregulated blood supplies.

Wan, who was said by his wife and colleagues to be in the custody of security agents two weeks after his unexplained disappearance in Beijing, had been strongly critical of the government's handling of blood collec-

tions. He alleged that local officials were benefiting financially from illegal, unsafe collection of blood through paid donations.

Through his Beijing-based group, the AIDS Action Project, Wan organized petitions to urge the government to provide care for victims. The project's website also attempted to raise awareness of the problem by publishing 'death lists' of those who had died from AIDS in Henan. But in July, the project's office, which operated on a Beijing college campus, was closed down for allegedly not following the rules for non-governmental organizations.

There has been no official announcement that Wan is being detained. But a member of the AIDS Action Project reportedly contacted last week by state security agents says that the agents indicated Wan is being questioned about the contents of an e-mail he sent to a mailing list. The e-mail, which included an official government document describing the number of people suffering from HIV/AIDS in Henan, is classified as a "state secret".

Wan's apparent arrest undermined some recent positive trends in Chinese AIDS policy. In August 2001, for example, the health ministry acknowledged for the first time that

Security worries stifle report on agricultural bioterror

Virginia Gewin

A major report on the threat of agricultural bioterrorism is being delayed as US government officials wrestle with the National Academy of Sciences over whether its release would provide information that could be useful to terrorists.

The academy's report, *Countering Agricultural Bioterrorism*, was commissioned in autumn 2000 and was due to be released in June. But its publication has been bogged down in wrangling between the academy, the US Department of Agriculture and the Office of Homeland Security.

The academy is keen to release the report — which was agreed by a committee chaired

by Harley Moon, an animal-disease specialist at Iowa State University at Ames — in full. But government officials want to cut parts of it.

Members of the committee who had security clearance were provided with at least one piece of classified information during their study, so the study had to undergo a declassification review before it could be released.

Jim Cook, a plant pathologist at Washington State University at Pullman and a member of the committee, who also sits on the academy's governing council, says that the stand-off is unprecedented. "We've never had this kind of difference in perspective — almost a squaring off — between a

government agency and the academy before," he says.

He adds that it reflects a difference in outlook between plant scientists and government officials on countering agricultural bioterrorism. The American Phytopathological Society, for example, has argued that trying to constrain information about plant biology is futile, and that the government should prepare to counter possible attacks. But some government officials favour constraints on information.

As far as the disputed report goes, "the final decision will be the academy's", says Bill Colglazier, its executive officer. He hopes that it will be published later this month. ■