Controversial HSC clinical trials report made public

Another episode in the Canadian drama involving the Hospital for Sick Children (HSC), a senior clinical researcher (Nancy Olivieri) and the pharmaceutical company, Apotex, unfolded last month. On December 9th, the hospital Board of Trustees held a press conference to release a review of the events that have plagued HSC for over two years. The 153-page report reveals the depth of the questionable legal, professional and ethical actions of each party in gritty detail, and as expected, has itself become the subject of controversy. On December 10th, Olivieri called a press conference to decry its contents.

The review was conducted by Arnold Naimark, professor of Medicine and Physiology at the University of Manitoba, in association with Bartha Knoppers, professor of the Law Faculty at Montreal University, and Frederick Lowy, former dean of Toronto University's Faculty of Medicine and founder of its Centre for Bioethics.

The controversy centers on clinical trials of an Apotex treatment (deferiprone) for thalassemia conducted by Olivieri (*Nature Med.* 4, 1095; 1998). According to Olivieri, she discovered that the drug undergoes loss of efficacy in reducing body iron levels with prolonged use, and that it has the potential to cause liver fibrosis. In brief, she says that HSC did not support her in trying to make these discoveries public in the face of legal action threatened by Apotex for breach of contract (see *Letters*, page 2).

Although none of the parties involved comes out of the report well, it focuses particularly heavily on the role played by Olivieri. Perhaps the most serious charge against her is that she "observed exacerbation of liver fibrosis" by the drug before December 1996, but did not immediately inform the hospital Research Ethics Board of her findings, with the result that patients continued to receive deferiprone until at least the following February. HSC is referring this charge to the Canadian Medical Advisory Committee. Olivieri denies the accusation.

Sections of the report focus on Olivieri's professional relationships within HSC, and suggest that she was generally unhappy with her employment conditions before the Apotex affair began. It also points out that Olivieri—and colleagues that support her—did not cooperate fully with the Naimark investigation and withheld documents that they claim contain important facts. Prior to the investigation, Olivieri warned that she

would not cooperate and explained at her press conference that she is waiting for a "truly independent, unbiased inquiry" through which to release her information.

Brenda Gallie, HSC Cancer and Blood program head, was by Olivieri's side at the press conference along with 11 international researchers. Gallie described the report as a "shallowly constructed, inexperienced, and inaccurate attack on Olivieri's integrity." Olivieri has also received the backing of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, which accuses HSC of unilaterally appointing Naimark to carry out the investigation and refutes its validity.

The report concluded that HSC was remiss in its support for investigators—it

failed to oversee properly two contracts that Olivieri entered into with Apotex, despite the fact that they involved HSC patients. The Board of Trustees will now carry out a second phase of the review aimed at "overhauling policies and procedures relating to third party funding of medical research." The report suggested that HSC establish a "Clinical Trials Secretariat" to provide coordinated and effective policy support. In addition, president of the Canadian Medical Research Council, Henry Friesen, is to lead a national study to develop new guidelines for clinical research. A copy of the report—which is unlikely to be the last word on the matter—is available at <http://www.sickkids.on.ca/HSCWeb/Review/Reviewhome.html>.

KAREN BIRMINGHAM, NEW YORK

Japan celebrates ten years of the HFSP

The Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP), which supports international research on molecular biology and neuroscience, celebrated its tenth anniversary in Tokyo last month, at the first of three ceremonies planned to mark the occasion. Although, when it was initiated in 1989 some Western governments thought HFSP was merely a political gesture that would be of little scientific benefit, ten years later this skepticism has been replaced with admiration as hundreds of international research groups have received grants and thousands of fellowships have been awarded.

"When I look back at the planning stage of the HFSP when the world science community was so dubious about its significance, the fact that it is so warmly received is almost like a dream for me", says Masao Ito, head of the RIKEN Brain Science Institute. The concept that basic science can be supported by a common funding mechanism among major industrialized countries was very new, he adds.

When the initiative was proposed in 1989 by the then-Prime Minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone, Japan was viewed as a "research parasite" by much of the Western research community due to its economically successful exploitation of research conducted in western nations. "We were being criticized and wanted to contribute to international basic research," says Nakasone.

The ambitious plan called for billions of dollars of investment, and Japan has

contributed generously: HSFP, headquartered in Strasbourg, receives more than 75 percent of its annual US\$47 million budget from Japan, with the remaining funding coming from five European countries, the European Union, the United States and Canada. Japan has financed 82 percent (\$298 million) of the program since it was started.

Other countries seem to have benefited from the program disproportionately. Between 1990 and 1998, 32 percent of research grants awardees were from the United States, whereas Japanese researchers only received 16 percent. However, in May 1997, an intergovernmental conference in Washington extended the program for a further five years and issued 'guidelines' for increasing contributions by countries other than Japan by 2002. Although Japan was seeking funding parity, with an increase in total program funding to \$70 million, it had to settle for a funding 'target' of \$60 million and smaller raises in donations from other countries. Subsequently, the US increased its funding for the Program by \$500,000 bringing its contribution to 9 percent. The EU is set to increase its funding of the program from \$1 million to \$3 million over the next two years. Japan has held its contributions steady over the last few years despite growing economic problems at home and pressure from the Ministry of Finance to cut government spending.

"I think the request of Japan for a 50