

## AIDS debate fails to hit target at development summit

Pat Sidley *Johannesburg*

Only the hopelessly optimistic would have imagined that the world summit on sustainable development, just ended in Johannesburg, would have adequately managed to tackle the health issues that crept into the meetings and on to the agenda.

Among the issues that were continually struggling to find a more prominent place on the agenda was HIV/AIDS, but according to Dr Peter Piot, head of the joint UN programme on AIDS (UNAIDS), people simply forgot about it.

He had been answering questions, at a breakfast briefing during the summit, aimed at ascertaining whether there was some conspiracy in the absence of AIDS as a major issue—or whether other factors could be blamed. The pandemic is widely recognised as the one factor likely to impede or even halt any form of development, let alone sustainable development.

Dr Piot noted that, left to run its course, the pandemic will kill

all those who may have been speaking about development. UNAIDS, however, seems to find it frustrating to keep the issue moving adequately. It was barely on the summit's agenda and has effectively been a sideshow.

It has become clear, however, that activists are not alone in their impatience about action to stem the pandemic. Companies, many of them represented at the business satellite conference of the world summit, have decided they cannot wait for governments (notably, the South African government) to treat their workers. Many are providing drug treatment for their staff or have announced that they intend to.

An important gain, however, for those concerned with the spread of infectious diseases in the developing world was the agreement on deadlines for the provision of sanitation for the 4.2 billion people without it. At least half should have sanitation by 2015 if the agreement is honoured. Partnerships have been



A delegate stands among a Friends of the Earth display of some 6000 statues made by deprived communities in South Africa to represent their struggle

launched to deal with safe drinking water, and there is a commitment to phase out the use of chemicals that are harmful to people in the developing world.

To this end, Dr Gro Harlem

Brundtland, director general of the World Health Organization, has initiated a movement to improve children's health, particularly those vulnerable to environmental hazards. □

## Medical council to investigate alleged research fraud

Owen Dyer *London*

The General Medical Council this week began an investigation into alleged research fraud relating to a study published in the *BMJ* five years ago. The principal author, Dr Mohammed Naeem Shaukat, then a British Heart Foundation research fellow, is accused of serious professional misconduct in handling research data dishonestly and misleading his coauthors and the *BMJ*.

The article presented research into cardiac outcomes among patients at Leicester Royal Infirmary and concluded that patients of Indian origin

fared dramatically worse after a first heart attack (*BMJ* 1997; 314:639-42).

In January 1998, 10 months after the article was published, the *BMJ* received a letter signed by the article's six authors, including Dr Shaukat, which stated: "Further examination of the data on which this paper was based, in the context of another project, has revealed important inaccuracies such that the conclusions of the paper cannot be sustained. We therefore wish to withdraw it unreservedly." The letter was duly published.

Leicester University Medical School, which employed all of the authors, began an investigation but kept its findings from the *BMJ*, instead reporting Dr Shaukat to the GMC.

The dean, Professor Ian Lauder, has told the *BMJ*: "I wouldn't want to comment while the case is actually under way, but I can confirm that the complaint came from this office. We contacted the GMC about a year ago."

Of the authors, only Dr Shaukat is accused of impropriety. One of the authors has since died, and two are still at Leicester Medical School. The analysis found that incorrect recording of deaths led to a consistent overestimation of mortality among patients from South Asia.

Dr Shaukat, who is no longer employed by Leicester University, admits failing to consult with the other authors after publication when discrepancies came to light, but denies the charges of dishonesty and breach of scientific integrity. He also denies that he was in sole control of the original study database.

The *BMJ*'s editor, Richard Smith, said: "I understand that the whole matter was effectively sub judice while Leicester investigated it. It's a pity this has taken so long. Since 1997 we haven't been able to explain to our readers what was wrong with the research in this article."

Professor Lauder said: "The complexity of a case like this is incredible. The amount of data that must be reviewed compares to a major fraud case." □