

Chirac announces investigation into heat wave's death toll

Alexander Dorozynski *Paris*

The death toll caused by the August heat wave in France has reached an unexpected and unprecedented high.

The number of deaths, first estimated to be 3000, then 5000, last week exceeded 10 000, according to statistics of the Pompes Funèbres Générales, a group of 352 undertakers who handle about a quarter of funerals in the country.

Extrapolating from their records, the undertakers' group estimates that the number of excess deaths during the month of August was 13 600.

On Sunday 24 August, 400 bodies still lay unclaimed in Paris alone. The medicolegal institute's morgue was full, and bodies were being stored in a refrigerated building of the food market in Rungis, near Paris, and in refrigerated trucks. The city extended the delay for burial from six to 10 days.

President Jacques Chirac, on his return from holiday in Canada, said on television last week that he deplored the situation of elderly people in France.

"Those over 60 are not well treated in our country," he said. He recognised that there were deficiencies in the organisation of France's health services, and he promised to remedy the situation. "I have asked the government that the causes of the tragedy we have lived through be analysed in depth, with total transparency."

President Chirac's government, meeting on the same day, announced that a surveillance and alert system specifically adapted for elderly people will be set up and that a committee of epidemiologists will evaluate the precise number of deaths attributable to the heat wave.

Another exercise will be to examine the conditions under which existing systems have functioned—and failed to function properly. Conditions of care for elderly people in private retirement homes are likely to be examined. The daily newspaper *Le Figaro* reported on 22 August that thousands of elderly people in the north of France choose to go to homes for the

elderly in Belgium, where conditions are better and prices lower.

A major question, still unanswered, is why heat related deaths have been so much more numerous than in neighbouring countries. One factor, pointed out by demographer Henri Lèridon of the French Institute of Demographic Studies, is that France has a large number of very old people, who are vulnerable to such a heat wave, which is excep-

tional in a generally temperate country. France has more than 10 000 people aged 100 or over.

According to Bernard Delanoë, mayor of Paris, 1474 deaths were recorded in Paris from 1 August to 18 August, more than twice the number during the same period in 2002. Last week the bodies of at least 40 elderly people not claimed by any relatives or social services were found in Parisian apartments. □



French health minister Jean-François Mattei talks to an elderly patient at Tenon hospital, Paris, at the height of the heat wave

"Terminal sedation" different from euthanasia, Dutch ministers agree

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

The Dutch ministers of health and justice have rejected a call from the attorney general, Joan de Wijkerslooth, for "terminal sedation" to be covered by the same legal controls as euthanasia. Dutch doctors have welcomed, however, the distinction drawn between euthanasia and terminal sedation, in which a dying patient is given pain relief that induces a permanent coma.

Terminal sedation and the withdrawal of artificial feeding and hydration are "normal medi-

cal treatment" and therefore "different from euthanasia," wrote health minister Clémence Ross in answer to MPs' questions. Normal medical treatment such as stopping or not starting treatment considered medically hopeless was not punishable, he said.

Doctors had reacted angrily to Mr de Wijkerslooth's proposal for terminal sedation to be covered by the same legal controls as euthanasia. The Royal Dutch Medical Association feared the "frightening

prospect" of legal interference into a normal medical activity already governed by professional guidelines. Mr Ross clarified the distinction, saying that terminal sedation is giving drugs that reduce dying patients' consciousness so that they are no longer aware of their surroundings and suffering.

By contrast, euthanasia involves giving medication at the patient's request that will result in death in a short time. In such a case, the doctors must adhere to legal criteria of care and report the actions to regional committees that review such cases.

The last large scale study into "end of life" decisions in the Netherlands, published in May,

suggested that between 4% and 10% of all deaths, about 6000–14 000 patients, occurred following terminal sedation (31 May, p 1164).

Mr de Wijkerslooth, who is the head of the public prosecution service, argued that terminal sedation can have the same effect as euthanasia and therefore should be subject to external controls on the care of treatment.

Counsel for the Royal Dutch Medical Association, Johan Legemaate, professor of health law at Rotterdam's Erasmus University, said it would be a "very frightening prospect for the medical profession" if the very high numbers of these cases were to be treated in the same way as euthanasia. □