UK health departments to lead on food safety

John Warden, *London*

The health departments will assume responsibility for food policy in Britain under the government's plans to establish a new food standards agency. A white paper this week, *The Food Standards Agency: A Force for Change*, paves the way for legislation in 1999. It will create an independent agency to protect consumers' interests in every aspect of food safety, as well as nutrition.

The proposed transfer of policy functions from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to the Department of Health is a key move, in response to persistent criticism that the ministry puts the interests of food producers above the public's health. The opposing argument is that since farmers are the first link in the food chain, safety should begin with them.

But the loss of public confidence in meat after the experi-

ence of bovine spongiform encephalopathy and *Escherichia coli* has convinced the Labour government that a change is needed. The food standards agency fulfils a manifesto pledge.

The agency will be required to make the protection of public health its top priority. It will monitor the safety and standards of all food for human consumption and will be able to change government policies and formulate new ones. It will inform the public about food safety, nutrition, and diet, and it will work with other agencies and organisations.

The agency will advise ministers and the food industry, but it will be independent of government, industry, or other hidden interests. The government wants it to play a major part in building consumer confidence in food safety. The agency will also carry out research and surveillance and monitor enforcement

The BMA has warned that all raw meat could pose a danger

of food safety and hygiene laws, as well as issuing licences and authorisations. It will negotiate on Britain's behalf in Europe and internationally.

The white paper is open for public consultation until 16 March. The government is keen to hear the views of consumer organisations, food industries, related agencies, and scientists. Further consultation will follow a draft bill setting out the detailed

legislation needed to form the food standards agency.

The BMA, in its evidence to the agriculture committee's inquiry into food safety, said that all raw meat should be treated as if it is infected and could give food poisoning. It warned that most people are not treating raw meat with enough caution, and few knew if their fridge was kept cool enough to prevent the spread of bacteria. □

Scottish cooperatives to be investigated

Bryan Christie, *Edinburgh*

The operation of family doctor out of hours services in Scotland is to be examined by the government after complaints from patients about difficulties in getting emergency home visits.

The action has been prompted by the death of an 11 week old baby in Ayrshire from meningitis some 16 hours after the local cooperative, Ayrshire Doctors on Call (ADOC), failed to send a doctor to see her. The Scottish health minister, Sam Galbraith, has asked his officials to look into this incident and any similar problems that have been reported across the country.

The minister has made it clear that he supports the concept of family doctors forming cooperatives to share out of hours calls instead of individual practices having to provide constant cover. He believes that the system in general is working well and is

proving of benefit both to patients and to GPs, but he wants to be assured that any failings in the system are being addressed.

ADOC is one of the largest cooperatives in Scotland and is responsible for 330 000 patients registered with 50 practices in Ayrshire. It was criticised just over a year ago when another baby died without a doctor attending. The 11 month old girl died from bronchial pneumonia after her grandmother was advised by telephone to give her Calpol and to check back with ADOC. A fatal accident inquiry subsequently concluded, however, that the death was an unavoidable tragedy.

An inquiry held last year by the local health board into the running of ADOC found high satisfaction levels among patients, and this finding was seen by the ADOC's chief executive, Dr David Watts, as justifying the cooperative's claim that it is providing a safe, effective service that is well regarded by the most patients. Dr Watts said that he welcomed Mr Galbraith's inquiry and was confident that the outcome would show that the service in general is working well. □

Scandal unfolds over blood donation in French prisons

Alexander Dorozynski, *Paris*

A group of 30 doctors and officials, including three former ministers, has been placed under judicial examination for alleged "poisoning and non-assistance to endangered individuals."

The four year investigation by the Paris judge Odile Bertella-Geffroy has shown that blood donation in prisons continued until 1986, long after specialists had warned of the high risk of HIV contamination and that the practice was the source of hundreds of cases of HIV infection after transfusion. Moreover, she says that even after the contamination risk became known, recipients were not warned about it, in spite of the risk of transmitting the virus to their spouses or children.

Judge Bertella-Geffroy has found that in spite of repeated warnings issued in 1984 and 1985 about the high incidence of HIV infection in prisons,

blood donation continued in several large prisons until December 1986. In Bastia (Corsica) and Fort-de-France (Martinique) blood donation in prison was discontinued only in 1990.

A 1992 report by the General Inspectorate of Judiciary services and the General Inspectorate of Social Affairs said that in 1985 blood donated in prisons represented only 0.37% of the total donated in France, but was the source of about a quarter of contaminated donations.

The number of cases of AIDS attributed to infection through blood transfusion is higher in France than in any other country in the European Union. A survey last December listed 1686 cases in France, compared with 414 in Italy, 304 in Spain, 122 in the United Kingdom, and 106 in Belgium.

The case will be examined by the highest court of appeal. □