Professor Kinghorn was giving evidence to the committee's inquiry into new developments in HIV and AIDS and sexual health policy since its own recommendations, published in 2003.

He said that while almost all the extra £5m (\$9.4m; €7.2m) had reached sexual health clinics, half of the normal £8m budget allocated for 2003-4 had been withheld.

He pointed out that in Sheffield alone the case load had increased 73% between 2001 and 2003.

He applauded plans for a public education campaign on sexual health, outlined in the government's white paper on public health, *Choosing Health*, published in November 2004. But he warned that the campaign would boost demand even further: "Unless an increase in capacity goes hand in hand with [it], services already under severe pressure will be in a state of collapse," he said.

Caroline White *London*

Quebec increases funding to fight infections in hospitals

The Quebec government has announced that it will increase funding for hospitals' infection control programmes by \$C20m (£8.6m; \$16.1m; €12.4m). Meanwhile, preliminary findings have indicated that *Clostridium difficile* infections in the province's hospitals have dropped substantially from levels in last year's outbreak.

The infection was said last June to have killed more Canadians than were killed by the 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (*BMJ* 2004;328:1457).

Among 88 hospitals in the province, the median infection rate was 11.7 people per 10 000 hospital days from the end of last August to mid-November. In Montreal's McGill University Health Centre—five teaching hospitals affiliated with the McGill University medical faculty—there were 15.6 infections per 10 000 patient days from

mid-August 2004 to mid-January 2005, down from 23.6 infections per 10 000 patient days from mid-August 2003 to mid-January 2004. The actual numbers of cases at the centre in the same periods were 167 and 251, respectively.

Funds from the hospital acquired infections surveillance programme have enabled hospitals to increase their housekeeping staff and to buy disinfecting equipment and articles such as gloves and clothing.

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

For more information see www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/cdifficile

Inquiry questions long term effects of Camelford incident

It is unlikely that the chemicals involved in the 1988 Camelford water contamination incident in Cornwall caused any long term effects on health, says a report published last week.

The report, by a subgroup of the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment, a scientific committee that advises the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Health, says it found no conclusive link between the incident and the chronic symptoms and diseases reported.

However, the subgroup has recommended further work on the effects of the contaminants on neurological health, the effects on the development of children aged less than 1 year old at the time of the incident, and the incidence of diseased joints among people in the affected area.

The incident occurred when a contractor dumped 20 tonnes of aluminium sulphate directly into the water supply at the Lowermoor plant operated by South West Water.

Over the following months more than 400 of the town's residents complained of a range of symptoms, including skin rashes, arthritic pains, sore throats, loss of memory, and general exhaustion.

Kunal Khanna *London*

Gypsy women launch claim following sterilisation

Katka Kosner *Prague*

Gypsy women in the Czech Republic who claim they were coerced into being sterilised by doctors are to launch the first claims for damages with courts this month.

Jiri Lifka, a legal adviser with the Czech ombudsman's office, said that 61 complaints from women claiming they were forced to have sterilisation have been lodged with his office in recent months.

"The cases go back to the 1970s and up to 2004," he told the *BMJ*, adding that all but two complaints were lodged by Gypsy women.

"We are still investigating, but if we believe there is a criminal case to be answered we could refer this to the state prosecutor, who could decide to bring charges," he added.

The first civil court action is to be lodged by Helena Ferencikova, who was 19 at the time she was sterilised in 2001 after giving birth to her second son at the Vitkovice Blahoslavene Marie Antoniny Hospital in Ostrava.

In her complaint against the hospital, Mrs Ferencikova is seeking 500 000 korunas (£11 520; \$21 660; €16 640) in damages.

"On the morning I gave birth the doctors presented me with a form to sign and told me it was for a sterilisation, which they said I needed immediately for the sake of my health. I didn't understand what it meant, so I asked them to contact my husband. But they didn't, and after-

wards I was shocked that I would never have more children," she told the *BMJ*.

Mrs Ferencikova is challenging the hospital's argument that they recommended the procedure because she had had two caesarean sections.

The hospital's spokeswoman, Eva Kujonkova, insisted that no patient had been forced into being sterilised against her will.

"The patient in question had already had two caesareans and suffered complications. The doctor involved believed it would have posed a serious risk to her health to give birth again. We believe the hospital acted entirely correctly; the patient agreed with this procedure and signed the consent form," she told the *BMJ*.

Under the communist regime, which ended in 1989, Gypsy women were offered up to 10 000 korunas if they agreed to be sterilised. Mrs Ferencikova's lawyer, Michaela Tomisova, who is representing 25 Gypsy women claiming to have been sterilised against their wishes, says that the practice has continued.

Last September the health minister, Dr Milada Emmerova, founded a commission to investigate the allegations.

"It is absolutely untrue that women are currently being persuaded to be sterilised against their wishes," Vera Carna, a health ministry spokeswoman, told the *BMJ*. "But we have to investigate these complaints, some of which date back many years," she said. □

Helena Ferencikova, shown here with her family, claims to have been sterilised against her wishes