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AIDS trust rethink on AZT

Catherine Pepinster on why the Terrence Higgins Trust is changing its drug advice.

Information about the benefits of the drug AZT for people who are HIV-positive is being withdrawn and revised by the Terrence Higgins Trust (THT).



Doubts about the drug — produced by one of the Trust's sponsors, Wellcome — have been highlighted in recent trials. These threw into question its use in treating people without full-blown AIDS and with symptom-free HIV infection.

The THT's connections with Wellcome have sparked fierce criticism from some people diagnosed as HIV-positive and others suffering from AIDS who complain that the drug's side-effects are debilitating. Latest Government figures, published last week, show that the number of AIDS cases in the United Kingdom has reached just under 7,000.

Now the Trust has decided to withdraw some of its information leaflets which recommend the use of AZT for those who are HIV-positive. It also said it would review distribution of leaflets bearing the Wellcome logo and a message saying: 'Wellcome is a pharmaceutical company with over 40 years' experience of the development of antiviral drugs. The company develops and produces zidovudine (AZT) — the first drug shown to be effective against HIV.'

Paul Barton of the Trust said: 'Follow-



Above: THT's Nick Partridge. Top: an AZT protest necklace.

ing the Concorde trials there is a need for a review of our leaflets and what they are saying about AZT. But what is not in doubt is that AZT is still a useful drug



Gays Against Genocide campaign outside the Trust's HQ.

for people in the later stages of AIDS, and medical opinion seems to endorse that treatment.

'Our leaflets about people who have tested HIV-positive and the possible use of AZT do need to be brought up to date.'

A newly formed campaign group, Gays Against Genocide, has joined in attacks not only on the Trust but on its chief executive Nick Partridge. Their accusation of genocide through the use of AZT have been completely rejected by Partridge and THT chair Martin Taylor who said: 'Their claims are defamatory and abusive... We have always ensured that our information is based on our own considered view.'

Wellcome supports the THT with an annual £5,000 grant, which is equal to just over one per cent of its corporate donations. The pharmaceutical giant also prints THT leaflets on its own presses. According to Gays Against Genocide, this amounts to 'free publicity and advertising'.

Further information about the use of AZT for people with AIDS is expected to be published in June when the International AIDS conference is held in Berlin. Meanwhile experts, including Professor Tony Pinching of Bart's Hospital and Professor Jonathan Weber of St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, maintain that AZT is still helpful for patients with AIDS-related illnesses.

Abused Asian women face deportation

A London Asian woman, who married after coming to Britain and was thrown out of her home by her in-laws after suffering violent and sexual attacks, has been told to quit Britain or face deportation. The woman, who has just four weeks left to appeal against an immigration tribunal decision, has also tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose, after suffering harassment by her husband and his family.

This latest case is just one of at least seven Asian women from overseas living in

the capital and being threatened with deportation. Most left their husbands because of physical and mental abuse, while others were ejected from their homes. They say the stigma of a failed marriage means they cannot return to the Indian sub-continent.

Last week another Asian woman, Matma Chopra, who lives in West Yorkshire, was ordered to leave Britain because she had left her husband and her arranged marriage was seen as one of convenience. Under Home Office rules, any spouse who enters the country and wishes to settle must prove that it is not a marriage of convenience by remaining married for at least a year. If women fail to meet these conditions and leave their husbands, they are not entitled to welfare benefits, such as housing or social security payments. The Home Secretary has the final say on deportation.

Pragna Patel, of Southall Black Sisters, said: 'There is no reflection within the immigration rules of the cruelty these women have suffered, and the way that they have been treated. They don't leave because they want to; they have to.'

Southall Black Sisters and other groups working with Asian women say that the rate of self-inflicted harm and suicides is growing amongst desperate wives who cannot cope with racial abuse and violence in the home, and self-immolation is a well-known means of suicide. In March one woman in Hillingdon killed herself by pouring petrol on to her body and setting fire to it. Race workers in West Yorkshire report that nine women have died by fire in the last three years, and doctors report that the rate of suicide among Asian women is twice the national average.