

are also contributing to the problem. Prison reform and the decriminalization of injection drug use are essential in combating the epidemic, says the UNDP report.

The impact of the epidemic has been compounded by insufficient public awareness, frequent stigmatization and lack of adequate policy instruments to cope with the disease, said UNDP in a statement accompanying the release of the report.

"Members of at-risk groups are often subject to social exclusion, poverty, stigmatization or incarceration factors which actually heighten the spread of the disease," said Kalman Mizsei, Assistant UNDP Administrator and Regional Director for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

According to WHO, the percentage of people reporting premarital sexual relations more than doubled between 1993 and 1999, from 9% to 22%. Lack of education may be the underlying cause — in Tajikistan for example, only 10% of girls have ever heard of HIV/AIDS.

"Schools are the best defence against HIV infection," said Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF. "They offer the best mechanism to deliver HIV prevention information."

A draft declaration adopted at the Dublin conference entitled *Partnership to Fight HIV/AIDS in Europe and Central Asia*, aims to offer 80% of drug users access to treatment and harm reduction services by 2005 and to provide "universal access to HAART [highly active anti-retroviral therapy] in Europe and Central Asia by 2010," among other targets.

According to the UNDP report, lessons can be learnt from success stories in countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia which have leveraged progress in building democracies into effective responses to HIV/AIDS.

World Bank figures indicate that funding to tackle the epidemic in the region needs to increase from an estimated US\$ 300 million in 2003 to US\$ 1.5 billion by 2007.

GFATM, which has approved over US\$ 400 million over five years for 22 programmes in 16 countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, recently announced the re-launch of its AIDS grant to one of the worst-hit countries — Ukraine. The decision follows the suspension of funding in January 2004

due to the slow pace of the projects which had received GFATM funds and the country's escalating HIV/AIDS crisis. A new fund management structure is now in place to tackle these concerns.

"But money alone is not the issue," warned Shigeo Katsu, World Bank Regional Vice President for Europe and Central Asia. "It is crucial to improve the information base for programs, to support what works against HIV/AIDS, and to break down the policy and social barriers to effective actions across the region." ■

Sarah Jane Marshall, *Bulletin*

MMR controversy raises questions about publication ethics

Ten members of a team of 13 doctors who published a controversial study in the UK-based medical journal, the *Lancet* (1998;351:637), suggesting a possible link between the triple mumps, measles and rubella (MMR) vaccination and autism and bowel disease withdrew this interpretation of their findings last month — an interpretation which triggered a collapse in confidence in the UK's MMR programme and reduced immunization coverage to below WHO recommended levels by 2002.

The move came after it emerged that the study's Senior Author failed to disclose a potential financial conflict of interest either to editors of the *Lancet* or to the paper's co-authors.

"We judge that it should have been so disclosed ... we believe that our conflict of interest guidelines at the time should have triggered such a disclosure," said Richard Horton, Editor of the *Lancet*, in a statement issued on 23 February 2004.

The case has since sparked a major debate on the ethics of publishing research findings, in particular on how editors can ensure that all conflicts of interest relating to the authors of research are declared.

Horton said he would not have published the study had he known that its Senior Author, Dr Andrew Wakefield, had a US\$ 102 000 contract with the then Legal Aid Board to conduct a separate study involving tests on 10 children in support of claims by their families against vaccine manufacturers. Furthermore, a "significant minority of children" described in the 1998 *Lancet*

paper were also part of the Legal Aid Board-funded project. The Legal Aid Board, replaced by the Legal Services Commission in 1999, is a public body in the UK offering legal services to those who cannot afford the associated fees but are deemed to have a case.

The *Lancet* devoted several pages in the 6 March edition to printing the retraction (*Lancet* 2004;363:750), statements from some of the researchers justifying the ethical conduct of the study as well as a commentary by the editor.

"We wish to make it clear that in this paper no causal link was established between MMR vaccine and autism as the data was insufficient," the 10 researchers wrote. Wakefield and two other co-authors of the study did not join the retraction.

Triple vaccine MMR is used in 94 of WHO's 192 Member States according to 2002 data, including 46 countries in western and eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union, as well as Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia.

Although WHO and many other public health bodies insisted the MMR vaccine was safe at the time the study was published, the researchers' findings dented public confidence in the UK where many parents stopped having their children vaccinated with MMR and fears around the safety of the vaccine spread to other parts of Europe and the Americas.

In the UK, immunization coverage had dropped to 83% by 2002 — the lowest level since 1989 and well below the 95% WHO recommended level — and in Ireland, similarly low immunization coverage led to a measles outbreak with 234 cases last year.

Last year US health officials expressed fears that measles cases could be imported from the UK and Ireland to parts of North America where immunization was low.

WHO experts do not attribute recent measles outbreaks in the Marshall Islands, Asia and Italy to the MMR scare in the UK.

But while damage, in terms of a reduction in immunization coverage appears to have been limited to the UK, the case underlines the devastating effect the interpretation of research findings can have on public health.

The case has sparked soul searching among the UK's medical bodies, ethics committees and medical publications on how to avoid research misconduct in

future. The UK's General Medical Council is conducting a preliminary investigation into the matter and other reviews of ethics are under way.

During its annual meeting in October last year, The Council on Publication Ethics (COPE), an association of scientific editors, called for the establishment of a National Council for Research Integrity to respond to research misconduct in the UK. Whilst the operational details of the Council remain unclear — for example, whether it should be statutory or voluntary, meeting participants agreed that an independent body was urgently needed and many of them pointed to the conflict of interest generated by institutions having to investigate themselves.

In his commentary, Horton underlined the responsibility of editors in recognizing the implications for public health of publishing research. He said that he and his editorial staff had failed to recognize the potential effect the publication of the 1998 study could have on public health. "These are difficult judgements to make in hindsight. For example our sensitivity to potential conflicts of interest is very much higher today than it was in 1998," he wrote. ■

Fiona Fleck, *Geneva*

Scientific publishers divided over US trade embargo ruling

A fresh interpretation of the rules governing trade between the US and countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and Sudan has shocked American publishing houses as well as scientists and editors worldwide.

The ruling, confirmed by the US Department of the Treasury at a meeting attended by representatives from 30 publishers on 9 February 2004, says that it is illegal for scientific journals to continue peer reviewing and editing manuscripts whose authors come from Cuba, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Sudan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, or Iraq — all countries against which the US applies full trade sanctions.

The Association of American Publishers, which represents American publishers and has offices in New York and Washington, says it believes the Office of Foreign Assets Control, which issued the ruling last September, has

interpreted the law incorrectly.

The Association of American Publishers is discussing whether to challenge the ruling in the courts. Allan Adler, Vice President for Legal and Government Affairs at the association, said: "If the rulings, and more particularly the regulations, were upheld in a judicial challenge, it would be a significant blow to press freedom in the US."

Arash Etemadi, Managing Editor of the *Iranian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism*, said: "This ruling will affect the free exchange of information in the scientific world. The governments of all countries should respect free exchange of scientific information, particularly in the case of medical publications, which deal with the life and well-being of the community."

Etemadi said he knew of colleagues who had held back submitting papers for consideration by American journals because of the ruling.

The ruling has received a divided response from the American scientific publishing community. Some publishers, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which publishes the respected journal *Science*, have decided to continue considering manuscripts from the countries concerned regardless. Others, such as the journals of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), have stopped accepting such papers — a move which has infuriated its members who make up the majority of the 5100 signatures on a petition calling for the organization to "cease discrimination against IEEE members from countries that are embargoed by the US Government." In October 2003, IEEE asked the US Government to grant them a licence authorizing them to edit manuscripts from embargoed countries but it is still waiting for a reply.

"Decisions to edit and publish should not be determined by the policies of governments or other agencies outside the journal itself," said the World Association of Medical Editors, in a policy statement issued on 23 March 2004 (<http://www.wame.org/wamestmt.htm#geopolitical>). The group, which runs a global email network for its members, reported that many of its member editors were troubled by the ruling.

"Our statement will not be able to change US policy, but we think it is important to have one, to give strength

to individual editors who decide to oppose the policy," said Robert Fletcher, Chair of the Association's Editorial Policy Committee. "They will know that a large number of editors around the globe are backing them."

The ban does not apply to the publication of articles, but to the peer review and editing of articles in order to improve them for publication. A spokeswoman for the US Treasury said: "If someone writes a poem in Iran, then that can be reprinted in the US. But where there is substantial editing and collaboration with authors on an article, this is considered to be performing a service — and we cannot perform a service for a fully sanctioned country."

Speaking in early March, she said the US Treasury was reviewing this process, to establish how best to allow the free flow of information, while still maintaining full trade embargoes against the five countries.

The trade embargoes are not new. They are enshrined in the 1988 Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act. This exempts information and informational materials from the embargoes, although the exemption has been interpreted in the US as applying only to material that is "fully created" — such as camera-ready copy.

Publishers had apparently not realized that this meant they should not carry out peer review, editing or sub-editing on manuscripts from affected countries. The issue came to light only last year when IEEE asked the Office of Foreign Assets Control directly for clarification of the ruling, after the Institute's bank had queried a payment to a hotel in Tehran, the Islamic Republic of Iran, where it was co-sponsoring a conference.

The Office of Foreign Assets Control ruled in September 2003 that "the collaboration on and editing of manuscripts submitted by persons in Iran, including activities such as the reordering of paragraphs or sentences, correction of syntax, grammar, and replacement of inappropriate words by US persons, prior to publication, may result in a substantively altered or enhanced product and is therefore prohibited ... unless specifically licensed." Selection of reviewers in order to enhance or alter manuscripts was similarly prohibited. ■

Sharon Kingman, *London*