

Vinegar and visual inspection used to detect cervical cancer

Zosia Kmietowicz, *London*

The technique of wiping the cervix with vinegar (acetic acid) and then inspecting it visually can be used to detect most cases of cervical cancer and pre-cancer, according to a study carried out in Zimbabwe (*Lancet* 1999;353:869-73).

The technique could be used to screen women for cervical cancer in developing countries, where cancer of the cervix remains the leading cause of death from cancer among women. An estimated 300 000 women die from cervical cancer each year in developing countries.

More than 10 000 women from 15 primary care clinics in Zimbabwe took part in the study which was designed to find an alternative to cytological screening for cervical cancer; cytology is too expensive and complex for use in many countries with poor healthcare infrastructures.

Each woman in the study had a cervical smear test followed by a visual inspection of her cervix after it had been

washed with diluted acetic acid. Tissue containing precancerous or cancerous lesions turns white when exposed to acetic acid, and any woman in whom an abnormality was suspected—either as a result of a smear test or the acetic acid test—was referred for colposcopy or biopsy.

In addition, 2147 women had colposcopy irrespective of their test results to compare the accuracy of the visual inspection with that of the smear test. The results of the first part of the study showed that detection rates were similar for the two tests.

In more than 75% of the cases in which a lesion was found on colposcopy or biopsy the lesion had also been identified using vinegar and visual inspection.

However, the second part of the study showed that visual assessment of the cervix was more sensitive than cytology (sensitivity 77% compared with 44%) but less specific (specificity 64% compared with 92%).

Commenting on the study in an accompanying editorial



Cheaper cancer detection could improve health in poorer countries

(*Lancet* 1999;353:856-7), Henry Kitchener, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the University of Manchester, and Dr Paul Symonds, of Leicester University's department of clinical oncology, observed that: "The completion of such a controlled study in an undeveloped setting is a substantial achievement." □

Brazil challenges doctors accused of torture

Fred Charatan, *Florida*

Brazilian medical associations have begun hearings to revoke the medical licences of doctors who took part in the torture of political prisoners between 1964 and 1985 during the military dictatorship.

The sanctions are being sought against 26 doctors who worked in military prisons during that time. The Brazilian human rights organisation Torture Never Again, which has chapters in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, has spent 13 years seeking justice for the victims.

However, an amnesty enacted 20 years ago prevents the survivors of torture, or the relatives of those who died while in military hands, from filing criminal

charges against their accused torturers.

"There has been resistance every step of the way, with the accused and their allies trying to destroy proof and cover up their involvement," said Edila Pires, the president of the Sao Paulo chapter of Torture Never Again.

The hearings began on 3 March. The first of the cases heard—that of Dr Jose Lino Coutinho, a gynaecologist who runs a clinic in Rio de Janeiro—ended with the revocation of his licence.

Dr Coutinho, 58, was accused of overseeing the torture of 11 political prisoners in 1969. Other doctors were accused of signing necropsies that listed false causes of death for political prisoners.

According to Human Rights Watch World Report, in February 1998 it was revealed that Dr Ricardo Fayad, a doctor who oversaw torture sessions of political dissidents during the dictatorship, had been promoted to the post of health director for the Brazilian army. □

South African public sceptical about new AIDS "cure"

Pat Sidley, *Johannesburg*

With alarming new statistics on the increases in the spread of AIDS in South Africa, yet another team of scientists has announced the development of a drug intended to prolong the lives of people with AIDS.

It comes against a background of various scams to treat the disease, an erratic approach to the epidemic by the government, and an increasingly cynical but desperate public.

The announcement, made by a team from a small university known as Medunsa (The Medical University of South Africa), was aimed at the public through a well publicised press conference after a five day trial on human beings.

Professor Wimpie du Plooy, professor of pharmacology at

Medunsa, told a now sceptical public that the drug, called Inactivan, was an anabolic steroid which stops HIV from replicating in white blood cells.

Few in South Africa are ready to accept the findings of the team as it follows hot on the heels of the now infamous episode when two little known, ill qualified scientists claimed to have found a cure for AIDS (6 June, 1998 p 1696).

Virodene, as the drug was called, was in fact a toxic industrial solvent.

South Africa's minister of health, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, tarnished her reputation by associating herself with the drug, which had been through none of the usual research protocols, peer review, or drug regulatory mechanisms. □