In brief

EC to tackle HIV/AIDS through poverty: The European Commission has placed the fight against poverty at the heart of its new strategy to tackle HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis around the world. It has set aside €1.1bn (£0.8bn; $1.4bn) for the campaign for the next three years.

Tobacco documents go online: A consortium headed by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine has made one million pages of internal British American Tobacco documents available online at http://bat.library.ucsf.edu. Another five million pages are scheduled to be added by late 2006.

Irish vCJD case reported: Irish health officials have reported the first indigenous case of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD). A man in his 20s is believed to be the first person to have contracted the disease from eating contaminated beef in the country. Doctors have ruled out surgery or a blood transfusion as a cause. Ireland has the second highest incidence in Europe, after the United Kingdom, of cattle with bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

UK students at risk of mumps: Students in the United Kingdom are being offered MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccination in a bid to stem the threat of a mumps epidemic in universities. Most people between 18 and 22 were too old by the time the joint vaccine was introduced and were vaccinated only against measles and rubella, says the Health Protection Agency. Cases of mumps hit the highest level since records began (in 1995) during April to June this year.

Older people in England healthier than ever: Older people in England are healthier, more active, and living longer thanks to better services designed to meet their needs, says a report published this week. *Better Health in Old Age* shows that older people are now more likely to give up smoking and take up offers of health screening and immunisation. The report is at www.dh.gov.uk/publications

US judge halts compulsory anthrax vaccination for soldiers

Owen Dyer *London*

A US federal judge has ordered the Department of Defense to halt compulsory anthrax vaccination of soldiers, saying that the Food and Drug Administration violated its own rules by failing to seek public comment before approving the vaccine.

The Pentagon began a programme to inoculate 2.4 million troops in 1998, and so far 1.2 million have received the shot. But more than 500 members of the armed forces have been disciplined or court-martialled for refusing it. One soldier received a seven month prison sentence.

Six unnamed military personnel sued the Pentagon, charging that the vaccine's approval had not met legal requirements and was therefore an investigational drug requiring informed consent.

Judge Emmet Sullivan of the district court in Washington agreed, saying: "Congress has prohibited the administration of investigational drugs to service members without their consent. This court will not permit the government to circumvent this requirement."

He also questioned the vaccine's efficacy, noting that the FDA's expert advisory panel had found in 1980 that in studies of the vaccine, "inhalation anthrax occurred too infrequently to assess the protective effect of vaccine against this form of the disease."

CHRISTOPHER BERKEY/AP

The vaccine given to US soldiers protects against cutaneous anthrax but has not been proved to work against inhalation anthrax

The vaccine was found to offer protection only against cutaneous anthrax, a risk for workers in the leather industry. An FDA Proposed Rule for the vaccine issued in 1985 found that "the benefit-to-risk assessment" was "satisfactory" for this "limited high-risk population."

The approval process was then opened to public consultation. In 1998, when the Pentagon began a compulsory programme against inhalation anthrax, the FDA ruled that the requirement for public comment had already been met.

Judge Sullivan initially ordered the Pentagon to stop mandatory vaccination last December, saying that the FDA had never changed the vaccine's investigative status. The FDA then immediately ruled the vaccine safe for widespread use. Last week, Judge Sullivan noted this decision came "18 years after the Proposed Rule, but only eight days after this court's order."

As a result of the judge's decision, the Pentagon ordered a "pause" in anthrax vaccinations.

Dr Tom Jefferson, who reviewed evidence on the vaccine for the Cochrane Collaboration and questioned its efficacy in a *BMJ* editorial this September (*BMJ* 2004;329: 524-5), said the decision to stop the programme altogether rather than continue with voluntary shots proved that the Pentagon knew there was no serious anthrax threat to its troops. "The claim that this vaccine can prevent inhalation anthrax is nothing short of a flight of fancy," he added. □

Australian army faces legal action over mefloquine

Bob Burton *Canberra*

The Australian army and Roche Products Australia face a class action after allegations that army personnel had serious side effects after being prescribed mefloquine hydrochloride (Lariam) as part of a research trial for a new antimalarial drug.

Since 1998, the Army Malaria Institute, a research organisation of the Australian Army, has been working with the Royal Thai Army and the US Army to trial an experimental drug, tafenoquine. In 1999, the institute, in collaboration with SmithKline Beecham, started a trial reportedly of about 600 Australian troops serving as part of the United Nations peacekeeping forces in Bougainville and later in East Timor. Mefloquine was used as the comparator.

Simon Harrison, a lawyer with the Brisbane based legal firm Quinn and Scattini, plans to file legal complaints in the next few weeks on behalf of numerous service personnel, complaining about serious side effects from the drug. Mr Harrison says that army personnel were not adequately informed about the potential side effects. The legal action will allege that the plaintiffs had depression, kidney damage, paranoia, and suicidal thoughts after taking the drug.

The Australian drug regulator, the Therapeutic Goods Administration, requires Roche Australia to include a four page product information sheet with prescriptions of the drug. The current information sheet, prepared in 1998, warns consumers who experience "depression, restlessness, confusion, feeling anxious or nervous" to inform their doctor immediately. "Other side effects not listed above may also occur in some patients," it states. □