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justifies its clinical testing in patients with SARS.

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Sir—The results of J Cinatl and colleagues¹ show that interferon beta is effective against SARS-CoV—a membrane-enclosed RNA virus²—in vitro, when used either alone or in combination with other antiviral drugs.

Their results concur with our beliefs that interferon, with its broad-spectrum antiviral activity against RNA viruses, might be useful in the treatment of SARS, either as a monotherapy or plus ribavirin.

However, the findings of Ozes and co-workers³ show that the specific activity (antiviral units/mg) of recombinant human interferon-consensus 1 (IFN-Con1) was ten-fold higher than that of interferon alfa-2a and interferon alfa-2b in vitro. Furthermore, IFN-Con1 increases the ability of or induces natural killer cells to kill target cells to a greater extent than does interferon alfa.³

Therefore, we suggest that IFN-Con1 and IFN-Con1 plus ribavirin are assessed as potential antiviral drugs for the treatment of SARS with the method used by Cinatl and colleagues.

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Politics and science

Sir—In his Correspondence letter (Aug 2, p 404),¹ Mark Robson criticises our incursion into politics in the pages of a scientific journal, castigating our “litany of complaints about US political decisions”.² We offer no apology for doing so, modestly continuing what we view as a virtuous tradition in public health that ranges from Virchow’s advocacy³ for social reform after the typhus epidemic in upper Silesia in the 19th century to, more recently, the activities recognised by the award of Nobel Peace prizes to the International Physicians against Nuclear War and Médecins Sans Frontières.

We wrote our Commentary for two related reasons. First, the policies of the US administration, in many different areas, are having profound and damaging consequences for the health of people worldwide, including that of many Americans. Second, this administration is engaged in a wide-ranging series of activities that will prevent these health effects being documented adequately. Any lingering doubt that we might have been mistaken about its attitude to independent scientific research has been dispelled since we wrote our Commentary by the publication of an important report from the US House of Representatives.⁴ The report reveals that what we described was only the tip of the iceberg, cataloguing more than 20 areas in which the administration has sought to interfere with the scientific agenda. It also makes clear that these efforts are not unconnected; each has the effect of advancing the interests of one of two groups. For some, such as abstinence or abortion, religious right-wing constituencies support President Bush. For others, such as global warming or environmental protection, there are important economic consequences for his corporate supporters.

We believe that a core element of public health involves making the often invisible causes of population ill-health visible. That we would remain silent in the face of such threats to both population health and academic freedom would, therefore, be inconceivable. History has repeatedly shown the dangers of not speaking out until it is too late.

And should our views be published in *The Lancet*? We believe that a serious medical journal should examine not only the immediate, but also the underlying, causes of disease

and premature death, which inevitably involve political issues. However, we also agree with the web editor of the *British Medical Journal*,⁵ who has eloquently described how many apparently apolitical decisions such as how much coverage to give to issues like bioterrorism, that are being talked up by politicians for their own reasons, are unknowingly advancing a political agenda. To concentrate on the immediate causes, while ignoring the social and political factors underlying ill health, is itself a political decision. Virchow was right when he said that “politics is nothing but medicine on a grand scale”.³

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Power shutdown and biological standards

Sir—The August, 2003, power shutdown in vast areas of the northern parts of the USA and in Canada lasted several days. An inadvertent casualty during the shutdown might well have been the biological standards maintained in these areas.

The potency of various biological products for human and veterinary use is expressed in international units rather than in conventional units of weight. Biological activity of these products is standardised against their respective activity in a reference preparation. Samples of different reference materials are maintained at temperatures lower than -70°C .¹ The contents of such ampoules maintain their biological activity when stored without temperature fluctuation.

There is every probability that the August, 2003, power shutdown involved electrical appliances used to store such preparations. If so, the