

## UN report on cyanide spill warns of risk

In a report released on April 19, the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) blamed poor design of the Australian–Romanian Baia Mare mine and bad weather for Romania's Jan 30 cyanide spill. Four Eastern European rivers were contaminated when 100 000 m<sup>3</sup> of cyanide-tainted water spilled from a dam at Baia Mare in Romania, 75 km from the Hungarian border, in to the river Tisza.

Tonnes of dead fish washed up on the river banks shortly after the accident from Romania all the way through to Hungary and Serbia. Hungary describes the spill as the worst environmental disaster in Europe since the Chernobyl meltdown. The Hungarian government is laying the blame squarely on the Australian owner, Esmerelda Exploration, and has retained a Melbourne law firm to handle a damages claim. No writs have yet been issued.

The UN report says that, while the

immediate health risk to human beings was minimal, chronic problems could arise later because the site of the spill was already contaminated with heavy metals.

Laszlo Nagymajtenyi, the head of the Institute of Public Health at Szeged University, Hungary, told *The Lancet* that acute toxicity in human beings had not occurred because people had not been bathing in the river and the drinking-water supply in Szolnok, the only Hungarian town completely dependent on river water, had been stopped at once. He said there is a good chance that the high

water threatening the country will speed the dilution of cyanide in Hungary's rivers. Laszlo Sujbert, deputy director of the Institute of Epidemiology in Budapest added that it is too early to estimate the extent of chronic health effects due to the spill.

Georg Röggl

### After the cyanide spill

## US newspaper alleges profiteering by tissue bank

US tissue banks and the for-profit companies that market products derived from bone, skin, and other human body parts are raking in millions of dollars of excessive profits from sales of donated tissue, according to a California newspaper's investigative report.

"A single dead body yields raw materials worth tens of thousands of dollars to businesses whose stock is traded on Wall Street and to non-profit agencies that obtain the parts for them", the *Orange County Register* reported. "Families are led to believe they are giving the gift of life. They are not told that skin goes to enlarge penises or smooth out wrinkles, or that executives of tissue banks—non-profit groups that obtain body parts—routinely earn six-figure salaries."

Although it is illegal to sell human tissue in the USA, "companies and tissue banks step around the law by charging marked-up fees to handle and process body parts", the paper said. A cadaver can generate as much as US\$220 000 in

sales, the paper said.

But tissue banks and organ donation organisations quickly denounced the series, charging that series was inaccurate and sensationalistic. In a letter to the newspaper, Richard Kagan, president of the American Association of Tissue Banks, called the articles "unbalanced, biased and slanted". The series gave the impression that tissue banks made exorbitant profits because the reporters confused revenue with profits, he said. "Where revenues are high, I would suggest you look at costs", he said, such as the costs of harvesting, transporting and processing tissue.

Kagan also complained that the paper unfairly chose to focus on the use of tissue for cosmetic procedures while ignoring its use for procedures such as heart-valve replacement, burns treatment, orthopaedic repair and "a multitude of surgical procedures that benefit hundreds of thousands of Americans every year".

Michael McCarthy

## News in brief

### Tularaemia outbreak in Kosovo

An international team of disease-control experts arrived in Kosovo on April 24 to help combat an outbreak of tularaemia. 534 people are thought to be infected with *Francisella tularensis*. The experts, from disease-control centres in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the USA will recommend and facilitate control measures and provide guidance on the clinical management.

### Preparing for West Nile virus

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention started working with 17 US states and New York City and Washington, DC, last week in an effort to prevent another outbreak of West Nile infection in the USA. In August last year there was an outbreak of West Nile encephalitis in New York City (see *Lancet* 1999; 354: 1261–62). Larvicides are already being used in New York City, and surveillance programmes are being initiated.

### US Supreme Court debates late abortion

On April 25, the US Supreme Court started hearing arguments on the constitutionality of Nebraska's "partial-birth" abortion law, which prohibits dilation and extraction for late-term termination of pregnancy. The case is expected to run until the summer.

### Dutch employers get smoke-free warning

On April 25, a Dutch judge ruled that employee has the right to a smoke-free working environment. An employee of the Dutch Postal Service had taken legal action against her employer. The postal service had hitherto refused to provide a smoke-free environment; the employee worked in a typical "open-plan" office in which many of her colleagues were allowed to smoke. The court has now ruled that the employer is obliged to provide a smoke-free environment or be liable for any damages sustained.

### Performance-related pay in Germany?

On April 25, the German Association of Care Insurers opened discussions on proposals for performance-related pay for physicians. The proposal is being opposed by other health-care insurers and by the medical profession.