

Abortion pill study conducted in secret



NATIONAL

NEW YORK (AP) — Fearful of violence, a research organization is conducting the first nationwide study of the French abortion pill, RU-486, without saying where the work is being done or how many clinics are participating.

"You may have noticed there are some nuts out there who do bad things to people who deliver abortions," said Dr. C. Wayne Bardin, research director at the Population Council, the nonprofit group sponsoring the study.

More than 100 women have been given the pill since September as part of the \$8 million study, which could make the drug routinely available in the United States by 1996, Bardin said.

The availability of RU-486, now called mifepristone, will not be advertised, Bardin said Thursday at a news conference. Women coming to clinics for surgical abortions will be quietly taken aside and advised of the new option, he said.

The study is aimed at determining the safety and effectiveness of RU-486. When it is completed in the spring of 1995, an application for approval of the abortion pill will be submitted to the Food and Drug Admin-

istration, which has promised to expedite its review, Bardin said.

"It is a tragedy that pro-abortion advocates want to use women as guinea pigs," said Wanda Franz, president of the National Right to Life Committee, in a statement. "NRLC opposes testing of RU-486 for abortion both because it kills unborn children and because its long-term side effects for women are unknown."

Bardin said more than 12 and less than 20 clinics are involved in the study. It will include 2,100 women over 18, who are in the first two months of pregnancy.

Immediately after the news conference, Planned Parenthood Federation of America announced that its clinics in Aurora, Colo.; Cambridge, Mass.; Des Moines, Iowa; Houston, Texas; San Diego, Calif.; and Williston, Vt., are participating.

"We're excited to be a part of its introduction into the United States," said Jane Johnson, executive vice president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. She said she did not expect Planned Parenthood's participation to require any additional security.

In July, Dr. John Britton and his bodyguard were shot to death outside an abortion clinic in Pensacola, Fla. The National Abortion Federation in Washington has reports of 38 bombings and 91 cases of arson at abortion clinics since 1977.

The Population Council is testing the drug under an agreement reached in May with the drug's maker, Roussel Uclaf of France. The company acted partly in response to pressure from the Clinton administration, which, unlike its Republican predecessors, wanted the drug made available in the United States.

The Population Council is negotiating with a manufacturer to produce the drug and is seeking a distributor.

Many large drug companies have declined to make the drug — not because of the fear of protests by outsiders but because of the prospect of opposition from their own employees, Bardin said.

"Most that I've talked to don't want to face the discord this product would cause in their company," he said.

The \$8 million for the study has been raised from a small number of private donors who asked not to be identified, said Sandra Arnold, a Population Council vice president.

RU-486 is administered in combination with another drug called a prostaglandin. RU-486 is given first. It disrupts the pregnancy. A prostaglandin called misoprostol is then given to cause the uterus to contract.

The combination leads to an abortion in 96 percent of the women who take it. It can cause cramps and heavier bleeding than that from surgical abortions.

Researchers exasperated in quest for AIDS drug

ARLINGTON, Va. (AP) — Scientists and activists, appointed by the Clinton administration to speed up the search for new AIDS drugs, acknowledged Thursday that they're not proving to be very speedy.

"I think there's been a fair amount of frustration ... that we haven't seen very substantial breakthroughs," said Dr. Philip Lee, chief of the National Task Force on AIDS Drug Development.

The task force was appointed in February, with much fanfare, to identify quick ways around the barriers for developing new AIDS drugs. The four drugs now approved to fight HIV and the AIDS virus don't work well and doctors aren't even sure how best to use them.

Eight months later, the task force has no visible results.

"We know what the obstacles are," said Pediatric AIDS Foundation Director Arthur Ammann, at a meeting of the task force. "I'd rather see us spend half the time presenting them, and (instead) come up with specific recommendations."

Although the panel has settled a few issues, such as not requiring a partner's permission before a pregnant woman enters a drug trial, it hasn't yet pushed for official policy changes.

Group to distribute report cards on hospitals

CHICAGO (AP) — If your hospital received a report card, would it pass or fail?

Starting in December, you will be able to obtain such report cards — for \$30 each — from the largest organization that inspects and sets standards for U.S. health care facilities.

The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations will offer performance reports on about 1,400 hospitals, nursing homes, clinics, surgical centers, home-care agencies and mental health units beginning Dec. 8.

Thousands more reports will become available over the next two years, as new inspections are conducted. The commission — a private, nonprofit group based in

suburban Oakbrook Terrace, Ill. — evaluates 11,000 facilities over three years.

Up to now, its evaluations always have been secret. The commission's directors voted unanimously last year to start making the information public.

"In the 1990s, the American people have begun to ask tougher questions about quality," said Carolyn B. Lewis, chairwoman of the commission's task force on confidentiality and disclosure.

"The new reports are designed to tell consumers not only how providers have scored in a given category...but to give the information in a useful, easy-to-understand format."

For example, reports on hospitals give a score from zero to

100 in 28 categories such as medication use, dietary services and patient rights. Comparison figures are given indicating how other hospitals measured up.

Each hospital also gets an overall score, and the report lists any recommended improvements.

"It won't tell you about the obstetricians on staff at a hospital or how good the obstetrical unit is," O'Leary said. "But it will tell you something in general about how the hospital does with regard to patient care and how well the place is run."

Accreditation is used by many states in licensing hospitals and by the federal government for Medicare reimbursement.

Charles B. Inlander, president

of the People's Medical Society, a consumer group based in Allentown, Pa., praised the commission for offering the reports.

But he said one drawback may be that the information that is more than a year old and derived mostly from reviewing records, rather than "standing over and watching how a doctor operates."

Also, health care facilities know ahead of time when inspectors will visit, so they can "spruce the joint up a little," he said.

"This is 'foxes-guarding-the-chicken-coop' information," Inlander said, alluding to the commission's board, which is dominated by representatives of doctor and hospital groups.

Cuban refugees escape from camp operated by U.S. military in Panama

PANAMA CITY (AP) — Nineteen Cuban refugees jumped over a barbed wire fence and escaped Thursday from a U.S. military-run detention camp near the Panama Canal.

Liliana Levi, spokeswoman for the detention program known as Operation Safe Haven, said military and Panamanian police were searching for the escapees. Two others who jumped the fence were captured, Levi said.

Panama recently allowed the United States to open the

detention camps to ease overcrowding at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. About 8,500 Cubans are in the Panama camps now, and the number is expected to rise to 10,000.

The U.S.-bound refugees fled their homeland on rafts and were picked up at sea.

Eight other refugees at Camp No. 3 went on a hunger strike Tuesday, demanding they be allowed into the United States, while others threatened a mass escape if visas aren't issued by Nov. 15.

Israel's army may shrink over time



WORLD

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's new peace with Jordan will not immediately reduce the size of the Israeli army or lessen its defensive posture. But in the long run, especially if there is peace with Syria, the Israeli military could shrink dramatically into a force similar to those of European states.

The agreement with Jordan bolsters has long been known as Israel's Eastern Front. It gives the Jewish state a 306-mile-long land buffer with its nearest enemy to the east, Iraq.

Jordan becomes Israel's second such strategic buffer after the Sinai Desert, which was demilitarized when Israel returned it to Egypt in 1982.

Military experts note that these two zones, with the early warning they provide, go a long way toward ensuring immunity from any ground attack

by Israel's Arab neighbors — a real fear for the first 30 years of Israel's existence.

And although there's no peace with Israel's other two immediate neighbors — Syria and Lebanon — agreements may be on the distant horizon.

What threats remain? Israel is still vulnerable to missile attacks, as proven by the Scuds fired from Iraq — over Jordan's air space — during the 1991 Gulf War.

That is why Israel has been gradually converting its military into a leaner, technologically oriented force with an anti-missile and long-arm strike force capability.

For example, Israel recently purchased 26 F-15i long-range warplanes from the United States.

The main push to shrink Israel's military was the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, which neutralized its most powerful enemy and enabled Israel to maintain a defensive rather than offensive posture along their common border.

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