

AIDS tests

I was involved last year in the evaluation for the Department of Health and Social Security of several blood tests for the detection of HIV infection, and have just read Abraham Karpas's letter (25 August, p 86) following your article "Health officers 'altered' data on AIDS test" (14 July, p 34).

Steve Connor's article accuses me of altering scientific data. The source of this allegation appears to be Karpas, the inventor of one of the tests evaluated. The fact is that there was no alteration of data, deliberate or otherwise. I and a colleague, Dr Bayliss, carried out this evaluation under code and in complete accordance with the manufacturer's (Cambridge Virucells Ltd) instructions, and produced a brief interim report which was copied to Karpas. This interim report was not comprehensive and the draft final report that we produced about two months later incorporated all of the data obtained from the evaluation by myself and Bayliss, and discussed the findings in detail so as to present an extensive analysis of the results. In the draft final report the results of two independent readers, myself and Bayliss, were presented and they show that the results obtained by the Karpas test depend on the reader's subjective interpretation of a staining pattern (it is a test requiring direct and microscopic examination of slides using eyesight).

The draft final report on the Karpas kit was sent to Karpas for his comments. The purpose of copying the draft to him was to ensure that mistakes could be corrected in the final text. There were mistakes in the draft, most of which Karpas pointed out. However, Karpas grew convinced that the differences between the

interim report and the more carefully considered draft final report pointed to alteration of data on my part and he demanded the removal from the final report of my findings, which were less favourable to his test than Bayliss's, and which he wrongly alleged had been obtained without the use of a microscope.

As was made clear in the interim report, I am a rather less experienced reader of cell-based tests (which the Karpas test is) than Bayliss. However, since Karpas's test is designed to be read by non-specialist laboratory technicians without the aid of high technology equipment and has potential for use where this equipment is lacking, my findings were of obvious relevance to the evaluation. Karpas's demands for their removal were therefore rejected (contrary to Karpas's contention in his letter to you, there was no agreement that a final report would be published excluding my data).

In an attempt at compromise, Karpas and, through him, Cambridge Virucells Ltd, were offered a further evaluation to be read and commented on by three laboratory workers from outside the Central Public Health Laboratory and collated by me, but that offer was not accepted (also contrary to what Karpas says in his letter to you). As a result it was decided that there was no alternative but to exclude the evaluation of the Karpas test from the final report. Had Karpas not demanded the suppression of my findings, a final report, with the mistakes that had been pointed out in the draft corrected, would long ago have been published.

It is with reluctance that I am drawn into making a public statement about this matter, but, after the serious accusation that I believe Connor's article makes, I feel I must put the record straight.

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Service*