

Hepatitis could be caused by new viruses

By our Science Correspondent

A more chronic liver disease can be caused by two unidentified viruses, a report out today says. It has been held up to now that hepatitis A and B viruses were the sole agents causing acute viral hepatitis. The finding means that new screening techniques will have to be developed to ensure that blood transfusions are hepatitis-free.

The view that the two basic forms of hepatitis A and B formerly known as infectious hepatitis and serum hepatitis are caused by two identifiable and completely distinct types of virus, has been sharply challenged by research carried out in the United States, according to the report of the Office of Health Economics.

A survey of patients suffering from multiple attacks of acute viral hepatitis, carried out by the University of Southern California School of Medicine and published in the New England Journal of Medicine, revealed that more than half of the victims of disease were attributable to neither the A nor the B virus. All the classical symptoms occurred and, although the initiating organism was largely the B virus, neither the B nor the A forms of the virus were detectable during the course of the disease. Earlier studies have hinted that one additional virus may be a cause of the form of hepatitis associated with blood transfusions, but the detailed studies reported from California suggest that two "new" viruses may be at work.

Whether this is another example of what is known as "antigenic drift" — the genetic mutation which occurs naturally and enables some viruses such as the influenza organism to change its identity, its coat and thus keep ahead of the reservoir of human immunity and the vaccine makers — or whether entirely distinct organisms are involved, is not clear.

But the discovery lends weight to comments in the current British Medical Journal pointing out that although the incidence of hepatitis of all kinds is relatively low in Britain it is much higher in many areas abroad. In these days of extensive travel some travellers certainly bring hepatitis back with them and since, for hepatitis B, the incubation period can be up to six months, the source may never be traced.

The Office of Health Economics briefing says that the screening of blood donors has shown that at least one in 300 has the B virus because blood transfusions were found to be a major cause of transmission, screening was introduced in Britain in 1970.

The OHE says that although Britain's approach to controlling hepatitis has been sound and that the costs of screening the whole population for the B virus carriers would not be worth while, new and cheap ways of identifying cases are needed.

DENNIS JOHNSON reports on the dilemma of a developer who plans a hotel on a Bristol Channel island

Fight over £3.8M short sea cross

A PLANNING application for a 150-bedroom hotel has been received by Woodspring District Council, Avon, only 24 hours after the developers threatened to take both the council and the Department of the Environment to court for making the project impossible to carry out.

The developers, the Weston-super-Mare Pier Company, say they intend to claim £3.8 millions compensation because of an earlier refusal, upheld by the Department, to give permission for necessary structural work on Birnbeck Pier, which leads from Weston sea front to the hotel site, Birnbeck Island, in the Bristol Channel.

Woodspring lawyers are understood to believe that there is no case to answer. But the pier company's advisers argue that a decision three years ago to give the hotel outline planning permission, provided the pier was strengthened, led to capital expenditure, and contractual arrangements with the company would not otherwise have undertaken.

The company's chairman, Mr John Critchley, a West Country cash-and-carry millionaire and its architect, Mr John Pegrum, of North Leach, Gloucestershire, say they have been advised by counsel that there are enough precedents in law to justify the claim. The amount has been arrived at by calculating 10 years' potential income from the hotel, expected profits from a contract with a big US travel agent, and money already spent on the site.



Mr Critchley and Birnbeck Pier

Birnbeck Pier, an iron structure about 150 yards long, was built by the company in 1867 and provides the only access to the island for vehicles. Eleven months after the old Weston-super-Mare Council gave outline permission for the hotel in January 1974, the DoE,

apparently to everyone's surprise listed the pier as a building of architectural and historic interest. The company has concluded that it is substantially for this reason that detailed application for reconstruction of the pier was refused by

Woodspring Council in December 1975. Last week the DoE announced its decision to uphold the council's refusal after an appeal. The new application for the hotel, lodged with the council at the weekend, is for detailed planning consent and

has been made to comply with the three-year time limit which applies to decisions in outline. But unless lawyers can resolve the problem of the pier, on which visitors to Weston-super-Mare have strolled for generations, the project will remain no more

Cuts 'hit middle class hardest'

By HUGH HEBERT, Social Services Correspondent

Those professional and white collar workers who cheer any call for public spending cuts may stand to lose more than their blue-collared fellow citizens when the axe actually falls.

Dr Julian Le Grand, who last year produced an analysis suggesting that about 40 per cent more NHS money was spent on a sick professional man or manager than on a sick unskilled manual worker, has now taken the argument a stage further.

At a joint conference of the Bow Group and the University Conservative Association at Cambridge yesterday, he presented a paper arguing that if this analysis is true cuts in NHS budget would hurt higher socio-economic groups more than lower ones. This might also happen in other areas of public spending if there were a similar bias in distribution towards the middle classes, "as seems plausible, for example, in the case of education."

Dr Le Grand also argued that since the tax system appears to be broadly neutral in its impact on different income groups,

then if the public spending cuts were accompanied by tax cuts "it is possible that the lower socio-economic groups would be better off and the higher groups worse off; the reverse of the conventional wisdom — concentration in the size of the public sector."

He concedes that this would depend on the particular mix of cuts. A reduction in social security spending, coupled with a cut in income tax, would benefit the better-off. A cut in health expenditure, coupled with lower excise taxes, would be of greater benefit to the worse-off.

Dr Le Grand's initial paper last year, based on his research at Sussex University, attempted to quantify a proposition that had already gained a fair number of supporters; that the middle classes use the NHS more effectively than manual workers. His new gloss on the argument does not alter the fact that when NHS spending is cut it is the ancillary rather than the professional workers who lose their jobs, but it offers a revised view of other effects.

Coalition choice is NUS poll favourite

By JOHN FAIRHALL

A MEMBER of the Communist Party's national executive, Mrs Sue Shipman, was chosen at the weekend as the Broad Left candidate for the National Union of Students presidential elections. With the backing of the coalition of Labour, Communist, and non-aligned Socialists which dominates the union's executive, she emerges as the favourite for the job.

The main challenge will be from the Federation of Conservative Students' candidate, Mr Steve Moon, a post-graduate law student from Birmingham University. His election to the NUS executive last year was the first national success of the revived Tory student organisation. On the executive he has built up a reputation as an intelligent speaker and an efficient administrator.

The other important presidential candidate at the union's Blackpool conference in March is expected to be one of the two International Socialist members of the executive, Mr Graham Trefall from Lancaster University or Mr Andy Durgan from Portsmouth Polytechnic.

The possibility of the International Socialist candidate winning the presidency because of the system of transferable votes was raised yesterday by Mr David Robertson, a Conservative leader. "If Steve Moon does not get sufficient support some of our members might find it hard to transfer their votes to a Communist, which could let the Trotskyist in," he said.

The other main Tory candidate will be David Wilks, president of Leicester University Students' Union, who last year came within a few votes of being elected to the executive. He will be standing against the Broad Left's Peter Ashby, the current deputy president.

Workers plan courtba

By PETER HILDREW, Northern Labour Co

About 3,000 of the 4,200 redundancies announced by Courtaulds in October had taken effect by the time the statutory 90-day notice period ran out at the weekend.

Production has ended at the Skelmersdale weaving plant, and at nylon plants in Belfast and Merthyr Tydfil. Other reductions at Liverpool, Grantham, Rochdale, and Carlisle have left only the Castle Rayon plant at Flink, North Wales, with the majority of its work force still intact.

The Castle factory was the largest in the "viscose" programme with 1,500 jobs originally at stake in an area of high unemployment and little alternative work. But several hundred people have taken voluntary redundancy since this week in a phased reduction of the work force.

Under a national agreement between the company chairman, Sir Arthur Knight, and the Transport and General Workers' Union leader, Mr Jack Jones, production of viscose will continue until the end of May at

about 60 per cent capacity, with the work force cut to 650. Some coming jobs, mainly for women, will continue until August. There is cautious optimism at the plant with the unions hoping that the economic climate will improve sufficiently by May to persuade the company to keep production going even longer.

The postponement has already delayed most redundancies until a better time of the year for job-seeking. But there is little prospect of new industry moving in by the summer. The Government has been asked to grant development area status to Deeside, and the Welsh Development Agency has been brought into talks on the area's employment problems. But small projects under the job creation programme offer the most immediate prospect of assistance.

Meanwhile, plans are being drawn up for the establishment of a workers' cooperative at the Skelmersdale mill — modern

North-west has top death rate

By our own Reporter

The death rate in North-west England is higher than in England and Wales as a whole and the region is particularly afflicted by bronchitis and heart disease according to the latest annual report of the North-western Regional Health Authority.

In 1974 the death rate from all causes per thousand population was 13.3 in the North-west, compared with 11.9 nationally. In terms of deaths from heart disease of men between 45 and 64 the North-west's best district, Blackpool, only just matched the national rate (4.92 per 1,000), and North Manchester, the worst district, was 57 per cent worse with 7.74 per 1,000.

Respiratory diseases accounted for 13.95 per cent of all deaths in the region, compared with 13.73 per cent in England and Wales. Deaths from bronchitis were especially high among women—30 to 50 per cent above the national average.

The report says: "The expected life span is lower and certain diseases pose greater problems in this region than in the country, as a whole.

"If it is accepted that health services are provided to mitigate the effects of disease, and to prevent it where possible, there is a strong case for arguing that the allocation to the North-western region of greater

than-average share of the national resources is fully justified."

Although infant mortality has been declining it is still above the national average in the North-west, and the report calls for greater efforts to reduce it. The report says that in 1974, 54 babies under one died from accidents, poisonings, and violence—a rate 34.7 per cent above the national average.

The report is to be considered by the health authority tomorrow.

Health in the North-west: annual report, 1975. North-western Regional Health Authority, Gateway House, Piccadilly South, Manchester M60 7LP.

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Williams attacked 'abused'

One of the candidates in the forthcoming battle for the leadership of the Transport and General Workers' Union yesterday joined the row over Marxism and Trotskyist militancy in the Labour Party with an attack by Mrs Shirley Williams, the Secretary for Education.

The Magistrates' Association has told the Royal Commission on Legal Services that it is still worried about possible abuses of the legal aid system by lawyers wanting to boost their fees. An inquiry by a committee chaired by the late Lord Justice James found the main charge that some lawyers add to their defence is to be tried on indictment because of the higher remuneration it would bring, neither proved nor disproved. The association added: "In other instances, claims of guilty

Quarantine
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