

iceberg of the problems we will be seeing with the wildlife in the North Sea. The urgent need is to stop this pollution now in order to prevent further destruction of the ecosystem."

Spurred by the widespread public concern that seals—particularly baby seals—seldom fail to generate, politicians have not been slow to react. The German government has already allocated substantial extra funds for controlling chemical wastes and for research into the seal deaths, while an emergency intergovernmental meeting is being held in Stockholm this week at the suggestion of Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson to discuss joint action by all states bordering the North and Baltic seas.

The need for urgent action was underlined at a scientific meeting held in London last week, jointly organized by the School of Biological Sciences at QMC and Greenpeace, with scientists attending from Denmark, West Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

The meeting recommended the immediate initiation of a research project to study the etiological role of the different viruses that have already been found, as well as international effort to investigate the effect of environmental factors, including pollutants, on the immune system of seals. "In addition, measures have to be implemented urgently to protect affected populations" says Courtney of QMC who chaired the meeting. "And, of course, for all these purposes, funds are needed."

For most of the seals in the Netherlands and around the Baltic states, the results of the research will almost certainly come too late. Britain, however, where a number of seals have died in areas around The Wash with similar symptoms to those observed elsewhere, but where the presence of either of the two suspected viruses has not been confirmed, is awaiting the outcome of events with particular concern, since there are currently an estimated 25,000 common seals around the British coastline.

Greenpeace is actively supporting the call for more research. But it is not sitting on its hands until the results are known. A number of "nonviolent" protests, to include the blocking of pipelines dumping chemicals into the North Sea, are planned for the next few months, and the seal deaths will be brandished to justify these actions.

"Last year, we warned the governments of the North Sea states that, unless urgent action was taken, within 5 years the sea could experience a major environmental disaster," says Greenpeace activist Andy Booth. "We were wrong; as it turned out, the disaster we predicted has taken only a few months to arrive." ■ **DAVID DICKSON**

Artificial Insemination Report Prompts Call for Regulation

A new congressional report on artificial insemination may pave the way for increased government regulation of the physicians and institutions performing the procedure.

An Office of Technology Assessment report released last week says that although artificial insemination is the most widely used of the "new" reproductive technologies, many of its practitioners do little to protect recipients from genetic disorders and infectious diseases like AIDS potentially passed through donor semen.

The report shows that only 44% of 367 physicians surveyed test donors for antibodies to human immunodeficiency virus, and fewer than 30% test for syphilis, gonorrhea, hepatitis, or chlamydia. Only 48% of physicians screen donors for genetic disorders such as Tay-Sachs disease, sickle cell anemia, or thalassemia.

Moreover, many physicians surveyed display ignorance about the workings of genetic disorders. Some 25% say they would accept a healthy donor with a family history of Huntington's disease (a genetic disorder that usually appears only late in life), while 49% would reject a healthy donor with a family history of hemophilia, even though the latter could not pass the disease along to his offspring.

(Sperm banks do a more thorough job. Of 15 banks surveyed, 14 test all donors for evidence of AIDS virus, while one tests only men from high-risk groups. Twelve banks test regularly for transmissible diseases and 13 screen for genetic disorders.)

HIV-infected donor semen has already been used twice in the United States, although there are no confirmed reports of women having been infected through donated semen. Four women in Australia and Canada carrying the virus appear to have been infected by donated sperm.

"It is appalling that something as basic and essential as testing anonymous donors for the AIDS virus is not routinely done," said Senator Albert Gore (D-TN) in introducing the report. "And it is often easier to learn whether a prospective donor plays the cello than whether he has a family history of Huntington's disease."

Gore called on the Food and Drug Administration to require sperm banks and physicians to screen semen just as blood banks now test for HIV antibodies. Currently, FDA recommends that all sperm donors be tested for antibodies to HIV. In addition, FDA says fresh sperm should be used only when the donor is in a mutually monogamous relationship with the recipient. Otherwise, sperm should be frozen for at least 6 months, and a second blood test from the donor taken for comparison.

A spokeswoman said Commissioner Frank Young is looking into the question of whether FDA now has authority to regulate sperm banks. FDA is also exploring the trickier question of how individual physicians can be regulated, she said.

Gore is also writing a bill to establish a national data bank to store the medical and genetic histories of anonymous donors. The bill, he said, will ensure the confidentiality of the data, but will also ensure that children born through artificial insemination have access to the data. "Such information can frequently mean the difference between life and death," Gore said.

The OTA report estimates that 172,000 women undergo artificial insemination each year, resulting in some 65,000 babies. Some 30,000 of those babies are conceived using donor sperm, the rest using sperm from the husband or regular sexual partner. In comparison, only 600 babies are born by in vitro fertilization and only 100 to surrogate mothers annually. Twenty states plus the District of Columbia have no laws on the books regulating artificial insemination, and only three states require that donors be screened for disease.

■ **GREGORY BYRNE**

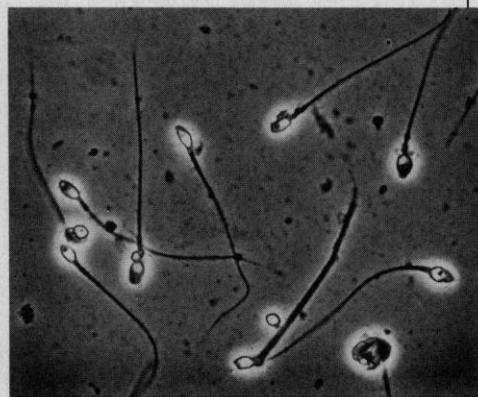


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