

## Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

### "Ice Age" in Hawaii

Urban America is bracing for what some believe could be the next drug epidemic: smokable methamphetamine, or "ice," imported from the Orient and now causing big problems in Hawaii.

Ice is similar to crack cocaine in its effects, which include rapid addiction, violence, and psychosis. But the high lasts about ten times as long—4 to 14 hours. Worse yet, at about \$50 a dose it offers a bigger bang for the buck.

A scientific offspring of snortable or injectable amphetamine—what Western motorcycle gangs call speed or "crank,"—ice is so far only produced by "professional" labs in the Far East, where the substance is melted down and recrystallized.

It has proved so devastating at its first U.S. landfall that Representative Charles B. Rangel (D-NY), chairman of the House Narcotics Committee, held a recent hearing on it.

"Hawaii is experiencing the first stages of what, I believe, is an epidemic of smokable crystal methamphetamine," said the state's U.S. attorney Daniel Dent. Honolulu police chief Douglas G. Gibb said "the ice problem is so bad that crack pales by comparison."

Dent said hospitals are beginning to see "ice babies," who may be "even more profoundly affected and difficult to get to respond to care and nurturing than cocaine babies." Other Hawaii witnesses said ice use has become popular in the workplace since it is odorless when smoked (actually vaporized, like crack). They predicted that it will swell the population of amphetamine users since women, in particular, take readily to a smokable drug.

So far there has been little evidence of ice use on the mainland. A Miami drug expert said



Mike Smith

Peregrine falcon.

went flailing about their outdoor chambers, crashing into the walls.

The flap continued when an adjoining meadow became the impromptu helicopter landing pad for the legions of officials, insurance agents, relief workers, and seismologists who have descended on the quake area.

But by last week the birds seemed to be adjusting. Physical damage was limited to a few broken or chipped beaks. "Just as people have habituated to the aftershocks and the terrific number of helicopters flying over, the birds are showing less anxiety," says Brian Walton of UCSC. "The problem is when it's an unusual occurrence. A helicopter near a nest in Yosemite National Park is very significant. A helicopter by the Oakland Bay Bridge [where some predatory birds have taken to nesting] is just the KGO morning news team."

it is likely to appear first in cities where Asian gangs are active in heroin distribution. Sources in New York say ice has not yet appeared there, but many crack users have heard of it and "they can't wait to try it."

### A Tasty New Tomato?

Twenty thousand perfectly good English tomatoes are about to be pressure-cooked to death, without even having been tasted. Furthermore, the vines they grew on, the peat they grew in, and the liquid they were nourished with have to be autoclaved.

The reason: the tomatoes are genetically engineered to ripen without softening, and the government has not yet made up its mind what to do with genetically engineered food.

The doomed fruits represent an attempt to make commercially grown tomatoes taste like tomatoes instead of soggy cardboard. The problem is that growers harvest and ship the fruit while it is still green to protect it from injury.

### Postquake Falcon Trauma

It was supposed to be a goodwill mission, but President Bush's visit to California after last month's earthquake ended up ruffling some feathers at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Startled by Secret Service helicopters buzzing the campus before Bush's arrival, peregrine falcons at the UCSC Predatory Bird Research Group facility

To develop a tomato that stays firm once it has ripened, ICI Seeds Ltd., near London, enlisted Donald Grierson and colleagues at the University of Nottingham. Ailsa Crag, a tasty tomato that is too tender for commercial production, was chosen for the experiment. Grierson inserted an "anti-sense" or reverse version of the gene that makes polygalacturonase, an enzyme that weakens cell walls during ripening. The result: the tomatoes ripen but don't get squishy.

Graeme Hobson of the Institute of Horticultural Research in West Sussex tested whether the engineered tomatoes would withstand the rigors of commercial growing. "They do seem to survive better," says Colin Bird of ICI. "We are seeing increased storage time and less wastage."

But how do the things taste? No one knows, because no one has tasted them. At least that's what everyone says. Why? Says Hobson: "We don't have permission from the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes to taste them."

But there is "no reason to think that these transformed tomatoes will taste any different" from normal Ailsa Crag.

What next? ICI Seeds is continuing its experiments and will apply for a taste trial once various advisory committees have figured out who's responsible for giving permission.

### Science at the Vatican

The AIDS epidemic will be the sole topic this week at the Vatican Pontifical Council's fourth International Conference for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers. The aim: "uniting our best forces to face together an illness whose analysis can and must offer a valuable lesson on life."

Among luminaries attending will be Robert Gallo of the National Cancer Institute, Nobel laureate Baruch S. Blumberg, Luc Montagnier of the Institute Pasteur, and Jonathan Mann of the World Health Organization.

### Replacing Hunter

The White House is mulling over several possible candidates to replace Robert O. Hunter, Jr., who recently resigned as director of the Department of Energy's Office of Energy Research.

The prime candidate is reportedly Harold Forsen, a nuclear engineer at Bechtel National, Inc. But friends say the highly respected Forsen might balk if government conflict-of-interest rules restrict his future employment opportunities too much.

Also under consideration are Paul Robinson, a former Los Alamos physicist currently representing the State Department in Geneva arms control negotiations, and Fred Bernthal, former member of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and now assistant secretary for oceans and international environmental and scientific affairs at the Department of State.