CANCER RISK

Nudge From Congress Prompts NCI Review

After receiving a complaint from Congress, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) has removed a fact sheet from its Web site discussing abortion and cancer risk, pending a scientific review of the information it contained.

On 7 June, Representative Chris Smith (R–NJ) and 27 other abortion opponents wrote to Tommy Thompson, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), deploring revisions NCI made to its fact sheet in March. The institute reported that recent studies indicate that having an abortion does not appear to increase a woman's risk of developing breast cancer. NCI director Andrew von Eschenbach ordered it removed on 19 June and asked several NCI divisions to prepare reviews of the science. An HHS spokesperson says that Thompson "never discussed" the letter with von Eschenbach, even though the two had one of their regular meetings a few days after it was received.

The controversy concerns a murky issue in epidemiology. Several studies before the mid-1990s found an association between induced abortion and breast cancer, says Robert Hoover, director of NCI's epidemiology and biostatistics program. But, he adds, "there was a lot of concern about the methods." The chief problem was that the studies relied on interviews, and researchers suspected that women with breast cancer might be more likely than healthy women to report having had an abortion. Then in 1997, a large study based on Danish health records of abortions—not self-reports—found no increased cancer risk. In its 1999 fact sheet, NCI concluded that the overall evidence was "inconsistent."

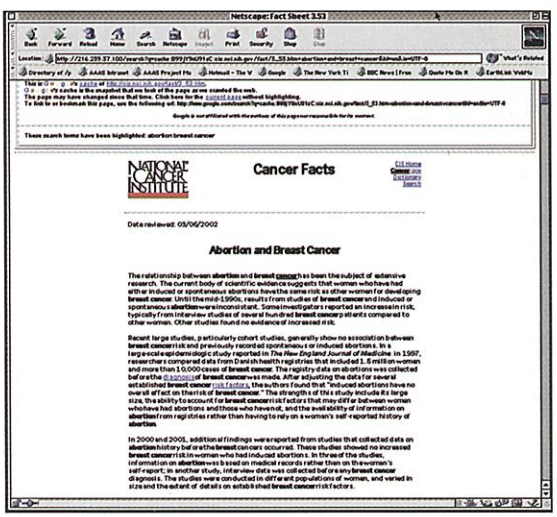
The institute came to a firmer conclusion in March, however. Citing the Danish study and four newer ones, NCI stated in a revised fact sheet that "the current body of scientific evidence suggests that women who have had either induced or spontaneous abortions have the same [breast cancer] risk as other women." The lawmakers called this a "glossing over" of the evidence and said that the fact sheet is "scientifically inaccurate and misleading to the public." Epidemiologist Karin Michels of Harvard Medical School in Boston disagrees: Although the lawmakers' letter raised one valid point about the Danish study—that it might have missed abortion records for some women—she says, an attached analysis contained "many incorrect statements." She thinks the March fact sheet "was fine."

Some antiabortion activists, maintaining that the self-report studies are valid, have mounted a campaign in some states to get legislation passed requiring clinics to inform women about them. "This is a key weapon in the antiabortion arsenal," says Elizabeth Cavendish, legislative director of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League in Washington, D.C.

Hoover acknowledges that "there have been differences of opinion" about how much weight to give the self-report studies. NCI officials note that several studies under way should help resolve the debate.

Complaints about fact sheets aren't unusual, Hoover says; "once or twice a year," Congress or consumer groups complain about NCI's positions on thorny topics such as how often women should get mammograms. He adds, "I hope we can get past this [latest request] and move on." Meanwhile, HHS spokesperson Bill Hall says, "if it's determined that there are no inaccuracies in the [NCI fact sheet], it will go back up the way it is."

–JOCELYN KAISER



Withdrawn. An NCI fact sheet minimizing abortion-related breast cancer risk has been pulled for review.

CREDIT: (TOP) M. BRUNET

PALEOANTHROPOLOGY

First Member of Human Family Uncovered

Paleontologist Michel Brunet has excavated thousands of fossils—elephants, crocodiles, apes, and hominids—from rich beds in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Chad. But last summer his good luck turned pure gold: A sharp-eyed undergraduate member of the French-Chadian team spotted the skull of a primate on the sandblasted floor of Chad's Djurab Desert. And when Brunet looked at its ancient face, he recognized the find of a lifetime.

Surprising skull. The first hominid was found in Chad.

Featured on the cover of this week's issue of *Nature*, the partial skull is now described as that of the oldest known hominid, the lineage that includes humans but not other apes. It is dated to 6 million to 7 million years ago and so fills in a crucial gap at the dawn of human evolution, when next to nothing is known. The next oldest published hominid skull is almost 3 million years younger.

Paleoanthropologists are stunned by the new skull's antiquity and surprising mix of apelike traits and hominid features. "It is a monumental discovery," says paleoanthropologist Daniel Lieberman of Harvard University. "It is unquestionably one of the great paleontological discoveries of the past 100 years."

Not only are the skull's features surprising, but it was discovered in an unexpected place: the ancient shore of Lake Chad in western Africa. Most other early hominid fossils have been uncovered in eastern Africa, notes Brunet of the University of Poitiers, France. The new skull "is a major opening window for understanding the origins of hominids," says Tim White, a paleoanthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who has seen casts.

The six Chad fossils, which include a nearly complete cranium, two lower jaw fragments, and three isolated teeth, show a unique combination of features, prompting