

## Drug users in China tested for HIV without consent

Susan Mayor *London*

People with HIV infection and AIDS in China experience discrimination, and many have little or no access to health care, warned a report published last week.

The report found discrimination in national and local government policies. National laws were discriminating, and some local laws banned people from certain activities, such as working in food services.

The findings came from field observations and interviews by researchers from Human Rights Watch (an independent, non-governmental organisation working to protect human rights) in three areas of China—Yunnan, Beijing, and Hong Kong—over periods of five and a half weeks in 2002 and 2003. They conducted more than 30 interviews with people with HIV and AIDS, police officers, drug users, and AIDS outreach workers.

The researchers found a range of problems likely to increase the spread of HIV. People interviewed in the study reported being refused admis-

sion to Chinese hospitals or clinics because of their HIV status.

In some cases, the discrimination began after they had tested positive for HIV without knowing they had been tested and without being officially notified of the result.

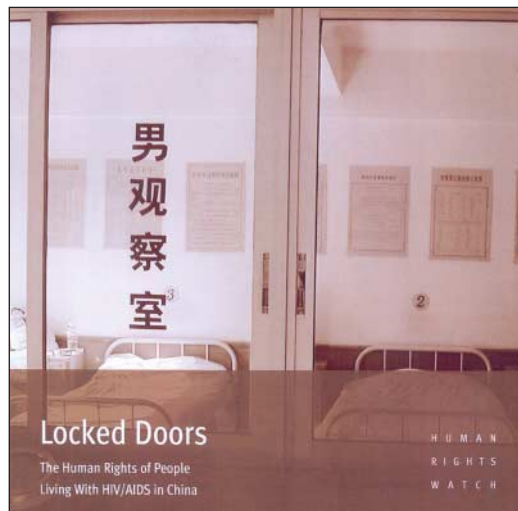
Observations showed that some hospitals, including one in Dehong, which has a particularly high rate of HIV and AIDS related to drug use, had locked their HIV/AIDS wards and barred all people with HIV or AIDS from admission to hospital.

Practices that risked HIV transmission, including unsafe injections with unsterilised syringes and recycling of medical waste, were common in many hospitals, particularly in rural areas (*Human Rights Watch* 2003;15:No 7(C)).

Brad Adams, executive director of

Human Rights Watch's Asia division, said: "Discrimination is forcing many people with HIV/AIDS to live as outcasts, and the Chinese government tolerates it instead of combating it. That is sure to make the AIDS crisis worse."

He added: "SARS [severe acute respiratory syndrome] showed the importance of national leadership and a strong public health system in fighting an epidemic. It is time for Beijing to show the same resolve in helping people with HIV/AIDS."



The male observation ward in a forced detoxification centre in Yunnan. Such centres test detainees for HIV without telling them

UNAIDS (the joint United Nations programme on HIV and AIDS) estimates that at least 1.5 million people in China have HIV or AIDS, although the actual number is probably much higher because local authorities have minimised the numbers involved. Government documents obtained by Human Rights Watch showed HIV prevalence rates of 4-40% across seven provinces with a total population of 420 million.

The report argued that China had the capacity to deal with AIDS. "Despite a severely damaged national public health system and discriminatory hospital practices, some individual doctors and nurses have made extraordinary efforts to care for people with HIV," the authors reported.

Some senior policy makers are already pressing the government in Beijing to take a more progressive approach to HIV and AIDS. □

*Locked Doors: The Human Rights of People Living With HIV/AIDS in China* is at [www.hrw.org/reports/2003/china0803](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/china0803)

## Science forced to retract article on "ecstasy"

Stephen Pincock *London*

The US journal *Science* this week published a retraction of a research article that it published last year on the drug 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA, or "ecstasy") (*Science* 2002;297:2260-3), a move that has prompted questions about the peer review process.

In this week's issue of *Science* (12 September), researchers from Johns Hopkins University admitted the results of their paper—"Severe dopaminergic neurotoxicity in primates after a common recreational dose regimen of MDMA ('ecstasy')"—were invalid.

Nine of 10 animals in the study had been given the wrong

drug—methamphetamine instead of MDMA—owing to the incorrect labelling of a bottle, Dr George Ricaurte and colleagues write ([www.sciencemag.org](http://www.sciencemag.org)).

In the original paper, the team said doses of MDMA similar to those used recreationally were severely damaging to dopaminergic neurons, something that had not been seen before. In their retraction they note that the combination of dopaminergic and serotonergic neurotoxicity that they found would be quite expected with methamphetamine.

Professor Colin Blakemore, the chief executive designate of the Medical Research Council, told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme that the retraction raised concerns about how the paper got into print.

"There is this supposedly rigorous process of peer review. It's very hard to see how that process operated properly in the case of this article," he said.

Professor Blakemore said he had previously queried the journal because 40% of animals in the study either died or were so close to death that they had to be withdrawn.

"Whatever one thinks of the toxicity of ecstasy, 40% of young people using it every weekend are not dying. It's that sort of thing that should not have got past referees."

The journal's view, on the other hand, is that the problem "would have been almost impossible to pick up with peer review," according to a statement from Dr Katrina Kelner, deputy managing editor for life sciences at *Science*.

She commended the authors for so thoroughly investigating their conflicting data, saying: "For every scientist, one of the main responsibilities is to the accuracy of information in the peer reviewed literature."

"It is the policy of our journal to set the record straight when-

ever a research article is later found to be flawed," she added.

An article in the *New York Times* said that unnamed critics have accused Dr Ricaurte of "rushing his results into print" because legislation designed to curb ecstasy use was before the US Congress.

Dr Ricaurte told the newspaper that the accusation was "ludicrous." His laboratory made a "simple human error," he said.

After a series of controversies involving peer review, Britain's Royal Society recently launched an investigation, chaired by Patrick Bateson, professor of ethology at Cambridge.

Professor Bateson said last month that peer review has been criticised for being too secretive, and that some have suggested it provides a way for the establishment to prevent the airing of unorthodox ideas.

"We want to see if any evidence supports such a claim," he said. □