about everything which has to do with big pharmaceutical companies and, alas, also regarding some of the well-accepted scientific dogmas. Controversy erupted when he sent a letter to some world leaders at the end of April, including US President Bill Clinton and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, expressing sympathy for those who argue that AIDS might not be caused by HIV. The publication of the letter came at the same time as the release of South Africa's AIDS statistics for 1999, which confirm that nearly 10% of its population, which means more than four million people, is infected with HIV. Interestingly enough in a heated parliamentary debate, Mbeki's position was supported only by the right wing Boerestaat Party. In fact Mbeki's stance is a first left wing politician, since up to now unorthodox views claiming different sources than HIV for AIDS has always come from right wing circles. Because of the international pressure which was rapidly mounting, Mbeki decided at the beginning of May to call a meeting of more than 30 scientists for a two-day discussion on HIV and AIDS. At least half of the doctors and scientists who attended the meeting are known for disputing orthodox views on AIDS. The team is supposed to give a report to the Presidium within the next two months. Among the dissenters is the well known Dr Peter Duisburg. Interestingly enough many South African observers are putting much weight on the fact that President Mbeki is constructing a similarity between his views on AIDS and his past experience with the fight against apartheid in South Africa. He was even claiming that most of the scientist dissidents in an earlier period in human history would have been burned as heretics. This statement was found in the above-mentioned letter to world leaders. In view of the worsening situation in South Africa as regards HIV and AIDS, many observers feel that the President will not be able to maintain this position for long against the mounting pressure.

Gore on genetic testing and clinical trials

US Vice President Al Gore announced a series of new health-care proposals in a speech on cancer policy given at the end of May, including a ban that would prevent businesses and health plans from discriminating against workers who find through genetic testing that they are likely to get cancer and other diseases.

"Unless we pass these protections, then there are going to be an awful lot of people who will not go and get the test done", Gore said during an appearance on ABCNEWS' This Week.

Earlier this year, the Clinton administration banned federal agencies from using genetic testing to deny jobs or promotions to their workers. Gore's proposal to extend the ban to private businesses was included in a talk the Democratic presidential candidate made in Atlanta.

"Most people already have such protections under federal and state laws", said Susan Pisano, a spokeswoman for the American Association of Health Plans.

"We have not been allowed to do that for quite some time and do not believe there should be that kind of discrimination", she said.

Gore also said he will propose a special fund to pay for distributing to doctors timely information from the National Institutes of Health and the National Library of Medicine about cancer treatments.

Gore endorsed a proposal now before Congress requiring insurance plans to pay for cancer patients to participate in clinical trials.

"If somebody has cancer and they are covered by insurance, and there is a clinical trial going on that the doctors believe is appropriate for the patient, it ought be covered", Gore said.

The provision was included in a patient's bill of rights that passed in Congress. Congressional negotiators are trying to resolve differences between that bill and a measure that passed in the Senate.

Health plans are expanding the use of clinical trials by their beneficiaries, but do not want to be required to pay for all of them because of the potential cost, Pisano said.

"Every time you drive up the costs you deprive a certain number of people of coverage", she said.

Toms River, New Jersey: Is Ciba-Geigy responsible for the high rate of childhood cancers?

For decades, starting in the 1960s, the Ciba-Geigy plant in New Jersey polluted the Toms River (a river that flows into Barnegat bay) with million of tons of chemical waste. Carcinogens ended up in drinking water wells.

In the mid-1960s some well fields, which were a
major source of the community water supply, were found to be contaminated. Those wells were later sealed. In the 1980s several private wells used for irrigation near the Ciba-Geigy site were taken out of service and sealed after they too were found to be contaminated.

Ciba-Geigy shut down its manufacturing operation in Toms River in 1996 and moved its production to Macintosh, Alabama.

Cancer was diagnosed in 90 children between 1979 and 1995, 75% more than one would normally expect to find among the 85,000 residents of Dover Township, of which Toms River is a part. Among children, central nervous system cancer is seven times higher and leukemia five times higher than national average. In 1983 the Ciba-Geigy plant was named a federal Superfund cleanup site after about 33,000 drums containing chemical waste were found buried in a landfill on the property (thousands of drums of another firm, Union Carbide, were found dumped about one mile north of the Ciba site). The cleanup is expected to run until at least 2020: Ciba-Geigy has invested nearly $200 million to address groundwater remediation issues to date: working with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) the company has developed a two phase cleanup project and intends to remediate the Toms River site so that the land can be returned cleaned to the community.

According to health officials the site no longer poses an environmental threat: the Ciba-Geigy site was a public health hazard in the past because a large number of people were exposed to plant-related contaminants in their drinking water. Contaminated wells that served the public water supply have been closed and affected private wells that have been used for irrigation have been sealed.

For Ciba-Geigy “contamination of ground water at the Toms River site was the unintentional result of waste disposal practices that, at the time, were both legal and common for the industry”.

Government agencies are doing an extensive study to determine whether the pollution is the cause of the high rate of cancer.

In February 2000, state health officials released a report saying that a large number of residents were exposed to carcinogens that had seeped into the water supply from the Ciba-Geigy Chemical plant. Known carcinogens such as benzene and chloroform were found in private wells near the Swiss-owned chemical company’s plant and other chemicals were found in public drinking water in the mid-1960s. This report, part of a $10 million investigation, called the 1350 acre Ciba-Geigy chemical and dye manufacturing site a “past public-health hazard” but it could not determine the severity of the exposure and the link with the high rate of childhood cancer.

A federal-state task force studying the issue presents periodically its finding to the public in Toms River.

An epidemiological study of childhood cancer is under way and the final report is expected in 2001. It will assess whether any of the potential cancer risk factors is associated with an increased risk of brain and nervous system cancer or leukemia in Toms River children.

As a result of the outcry over the childhood cancer cluster, dozens of families afflicted with childhood cancer have become involved and mobilized to take action. In 1997 they announced the formation of the organization TEACH (Toxic Environment Affects Children's Health, http://www.tr-teach.org). According to this organization the industrial toxic waste is definitely a cause of the high rate of cancer. Clusters of brain, nervous system cancer and acute lymphocytic leukemia, are occurring in a region where, like Toms River, drinking water has been contaminated by carcinogenic volatile organic compounds (VOCs) discharged by industry into underground sources. In addition to Toms River child cancer clusters have been discovered and are being investigated in Rochester, New York; Christian County, Illinois; Winona, Texas; Port St. Lucie, Florida; McFarland, California.

A 1997 report from the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease registry found over 41 million Americans living within 4 miles of toxic land dumps where the toxic waste exposure is at a level threatening public drinking groundwater. This report also estimates that they are 436,000 hazardous waste sites nationwide.

Perhaps not everyone knows that...

... aspirin reduces the risk of pulmonary embolism and deep-vein thrombosis by at least a third throughout a period of increased risk. Hence, there is now good evidence for considering aspirin routinely in a wide range of surgical and medical groups at high risk of venous thromboembolism. These are the conclusions of a trial on patients seen in 170 hospitals. The investigators randomised 13 356 patients undergoing surgery for hip fracture, and 4088 patients undergoing elective arthroplasty. Among the patients with hip fracture, allocation to aspirin produced proportional reductions in pulmonary embolism of 43%, and in symptomatic deep-vein thrombosis of 29%. Results were similar among patients with elective arthroplasty [1].

... intraoperative use of aprotinin, a low-molecular-weight serine-protease inhibitor with potent antifibrinolytic activity, in adult patients undergoing orthotopic liver transplantation significantly reduces blood transfusion requirements and should be routinely used in patients without contraindications. These are the results of a trial on 137 patients who received either high-dose aprotinin (n = 46), regular-dose aprotinin (n = 43), or placebo (n = 48). Intraoperative blood loss was significantly lower in the aprotinin-treated patients, with a reduction of 60% in the high-dose group and