

## Dutch euthanasia law passed by parliament

On Nov 28 the majority of the Dutch parliament (with the exception of the Christian-Democrats) voted the new euthanasia proposal into law. The law, the world's first, allows physicians to terminate life or assist with suicide, provided certain requirements (see *Lancet* Nov 11, p 1666) are met.

The law concludes 30 years of public and legal discussion. Health Minister Els Borst and Justice Minister Benk Korthals, have welcomed the new law, and expect more transparency around euthanasia, now that doctors can not be punished.

Opponents disagree and fear that anyone will be able to end his/her life easily at any time. Discussion on euthanasia in the Netherlands is likely to continue. During the parliamentary debate, Borst has said that life termination should be permissible for patients in the first stage of dementia, arguing that the prospect of dementia can also cause unbearable suffering.

Wim Weber

## Methanol-laced moonshine kills 140 in Kenya

On Nov 22, a Kenyan court charged 6 people with manslaughter for illegally brewing and distributing an alcoholic beverage that resulted in around 140 deaths in capital Nairobi and the neighboring Kiambu district around Nov 15. At least 20 others became irreversibly blind and more than 400 were admitted to hospital in what is considered as one of the worst poisoning incidents resulting from consumption of illicit brews in the country's history.

Police said charges against another 52 suspects who had also been arrested, would be made soon. Police added that the brew had been laced with methanol to enhance its potency. Because of the widespread consumption of these unregulated drinks, such poisoning incidents are fairly common. For example, in 1998 a similar brew killed 100 people. Last year, another 23 died and 5 became blind after drinking a homemade brew.

Last week, a protest group of around 300 women, angered by the

incident, accused the government of doing too little to stem the tide of brew-related deaths. The women destroyed the shebeens and impounded illegal brewing and distilling equipment during the demonstration, which was organised by the Kangemi Women's Group. Grace Njoroge, the group's chairperson, said the women were suffering because alcoholic husbands were abandoning their homes.

Meanwhile the Kenyan president Daniel Arap Moi announced that steps were being taken to close down factories that manufacture illicit brews. He argued that the increase in illicit brew production and consumption had come after the controversial 1997 repeal of the Chiefs Authority Act. The repeal, which came just before the 1997 multiparty elections, diluted the powers of the chiefs, making it difficult for them to crack down on local moonshine manufacture.

Khahir Ahmad

## Irish concerned about health effects of stimulant soft drinks

The Irish government is ordering urgent research into the effects of so-called "functional energy" or stimulant soft drinks after an inquest jury recommended urgent research last week. Although the jury attached no blame to stimulant drinks at the inquest of 18-year-old Russ Cooney who died while playing basketball, it noted he had consumed three cans of Red Bull and raised questions in general about safe consumption and the effects of drinking too much.

The manufacturers of Red Bull have said they are "astonished" at the jury's call for research into products such as theirs. "The testimony of two Irish pathologists and one English pathologist clearly stating that Red Bull had nothing to do with Mr Cooney's death seems to have left little impression", they said.

Health Minister Michael Martin said that the safety of such drinks will be examined by the Food Safety Promotion Board, an all-Ireland body set up under the Good Friday Agreement. The Board is expected to commission an independent scientific study soon.

The European Union Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, David Byrne,

has also backed the inquest jury's recommendation for research into stimulant drinks saying he had asked the EU's scientific committee to look

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### Getting some functional energy

again at stimulants and their effect on the body. "These are important issues in the whole context of food and food safety", he said.

The drinks have three principal constituents: caffeine, taurine, and glucuronolactone. There is about 75 mg of caffeine in 200 mL of a stimulant drink, compared with about 21 mg in the same measure of a cola drink, and 80 mg in a cup of filter coffee. A report by the European Scientific Committee on Food in 1999 found that there was insufficient research available to establish

safe upper-limit levels for taurine or glucuronolactone intake.

The jury's recommendation has focused public attention on use or abuse of the stimulant drinks in Ireland which has one of the highest sales figures in the world. According to pub and club managers, it's a popular mixer for vodka among young drinkers. There are anecdotal reports from bouncers and the police that there has been a rise in aggressive late-night violence because people switch to a stimulant drink as a mixer when they begin to feel drowsy after too much alcohol. Some establishments now refuse to sell the drinks.

It also emerged last week that senior doctors had met with the Prime Minister in August to express their concern at the level of late night violent injuries showing up in casualty departments. The doctors said they were concerned at the levels of stimulant drinks and alcohol being consumed in many of these cases. As a result, a committee of the police commissioner's office was set up to examine the behavioural use of stimulant drinks. That committee will report shortly.

Karen Birchard