

## The Newcomers

Crack - a form of solidified cocaine - began to make its mark on the British drugs scene, having already become the most popular street drug in parts of the USA. Designer Drugs (DD), manufactured in professional underground laboratories, became a new craze. The amphetamine derivative Ecstasy (MDMA) achieved special notoriety through its link with the growth of the Acid House cult. In the USA the DD China White became a West Coast fad: at a street price of \$3,200 a gram.

## The Business

[ Panama's General Noriega, a longstanding friend of US administrations, was charged in Florida in February with turning his country into a 'vast criminal enterprise' by assisting the Colombian Medellin drugs cartel to ship cocaine into the USA. His activities were also linked to Oliver North's dealings with the contras. Forty officials of the Luxembourg-based Bank Of Credit And Commerce International were arrested in the USA and accused of laundering some \$32m of drug profits in collaboration with Noriega and the Colombian cartels. *Fortune* magazine called narcotics the 'fastest-growing and most profitable industry in the world'. On Wall Street over a dozen brokers were arrested for cocaine dealing. US and European cocaine prices reached their lowest point in years, indicating an increase in supply.

## The Election

Jesse Jackson campaigned for the Democratic nomination with the slogan 'hope not dope'. At the White House, three secret service guards and two national security council secretaries were suspended or dismissed on suspicion of drug abuse. George Bush called for the death penalty for pushing lethal narcotics, and promised to put Dan Quayle in charge of the country's war on drugs. Polls indicated that a majority of Americans now thought that fighting drugs was more important than

# Trials And Tribulations

One way and another, it was quite a year for drugs news. **Chris Pate** rounds up the main events, and **Judy Tavanyar** assesses the year's progress towards a more effective Aids treatment

fighting communism.

## The Partnership

Operation Diplomat marked a first for Soviet-British co-operation, allowing British customs to net over £10m-worth of Afghan cannabis which the Soviet authorities had tracked through the USSR. Britain signed mutual aid agreements on drugs with both the USA and the Soviet Union.

## The Lager Louts

The Licensing Act 1988 legalised all-day pub opening in England and Wales from September. A month later, the Home Office claimed that it had not led to an increase in drink-related crime. Government called for stiffer penalties against drink offenders after fears about alcohol-inflamed rural riots and anti-social City 'yukkies'. Coventry experimented by banning the drinking of alcohol in designated public places.

## The Victory

After a rocky start, French pharmaceutical manufacturers Roussel Uclaf were able to market their abortion drug RU 486 in November. Promoted as a safe and simple abortion pill, RU 486 had been the subject of furious controversy between 'pro-life' campaigners, in and outside France; and an alliance of health professionals, the World Health Organisation and the French government.

## Aids: The Trials

It's been a highly successful year for Wellcome, the pharmaceutical company responsi-

ble for the leading Aids drug AZT (brand name: Retrovir). In November, pre-tax profits of £221m were announced, with Retrovir alone achieving sales of £90m and an estimated profit of £45m.

AZT is the most widely-used Aids treatment available. It is not, however, a cure (although it appears to control levels of HIV in the body temporarily) and it is not cheap: a year's treatment for one person with Aids costs £3,500 - or about £7,000 from diagnosis to death. Furthermore, the drug is highly toxic (side effects include anaemia) and is only effective during the course of treatment.

Trials of AZT have previously involved only people with Aids or significant HIV-related illness. However, in July, the Medical Research Council announced the setting-up of a UK three-year trial for asymptomatic people with HIV, to be run jointly with INSERM, its French equivalent, and Wellcome, who are supplying the drug for free. The trial organisers will allocate AZT to 50% of 1,000 volunteers and a placebo to the other 50%, at random. Neither participants nor their doctors will know who is taking which, although people who develop serious HIV-related illness during the trial will be given treatment.

Apart from providing information about the value of AZT in delaying HIV-related illness, the aim of the trial is to avoid bias arising from patients' and doctors' ex-



Ben Johnson: Won the gold after running 100 metres in 9.79 seconds

pectations of improved health from the drug. It raises significant questions, however, some of which were examined at an October consultative meeting in London. Could healthy people with HIV damage their chances of staying well by taking a toxic drug? What about the stress for participants induced by ignorance of whether they are on AZT or the placebo? And, if the trial succeeds, will AZT be automatically provided for the millions of people with HIV worldwide who may demand it, despite the enormous cost involved?

Until better information, adequate funding and more speedily-organised trials are available, these questions



will stay unanswered. Meanwhile, alternating AZT weekly with another drug, Dideoxycytidine (DDC) is being tried on US patients with Aids over a year. So far, three of 17 participants have avoided the drug's side-effects and shown striking improvement in brain and nerve function. •

### **Olympics: The Scandal**

September's Olympic Games in Seoul went down in history for their drug abuse scandals as much as for their sporting successes. Canadian athlete Ben Johnson was stripped of his gold medal and sent home in disgrace after failing a drug test. Johnson, who had won the gold after running 100 metres in 9.79 seconds, was disqualified from track competition for two years. Athletes from Australia, Spain and Hungary were also found guilty of drug-taking, as were two medal-winning

Bulgarian weight-lifters.

Illicit supplies of Human Growth Hormone (HGH), developed to treat children with growth deficiencies, became available in some British sports circles as a substitute for steroids. Experts concede that there is little chance of HGH showing up in tests.

International conferences on combatting drug abuse in sport produced numerous statements but little commitment to enforce worldwide standards of testing and control. A meeting of the General Assembly of International Sports Federations in Lausanne in November was unable to agree on uniform anti-drugs measures. Unesco's meeting in Moscow the same month did accept the earlier recommendations of the First Permanent World Conference against doping in sport, on harmonising penalties. But more concrete commitments on testing were

left to a bilateral US-Soviet agreement signed in November. Meanwhile the Council of Europe is working on a binding convention, put forward by British Sports Minister Colin Moynihan. •

### **Opren: The Sting**

1988 may have been a good year for record-breaking libel awards, but for victims of the anti-arthritis drug Opren it was a year of legal misery. Opren has killed some users by causing liver failure, and has left others housebound with eye and skin photosensitivity. In Britain, the DHSS listed 83 deaths and 3,963 adverse reaction reports from the drug.

In the USA, Opren manufacturers Eli Lilly, who marketed the drug heavily after inadequate testing, have paid out \$56m to 103 claimants, in some cases rushing to make large payments before cases

reached the courts. In Britain, with much less punitive legislation, the first round of court cases produced an average of £1,800 for the 1,354 initial claimants. The 28 claimants who refused to accept the settlement had their legal aid terminated. However, over 500 more British victims have initiated fresh legal action. Meanwhile the government has rejected requests to set aside funds for research to assist the Opren victims.

Eli Lilly have been internationally discredited by the Opren affair, and are now boycotted by a number of ethical investment trusts. But this year's proceedings have shown that the British legal system has effectively dumped the drug's victims here, most of whom are elderly, sick and poor. It can be tough if you're not Koo Stark or Jeffrey Archer. •

**The Success:** The unexpected presentation of a 1988 Nobel prize to Sir James Black for drug design - most notably beta blockers - jolted the scientific community into acknowledging something they had largely glossed over. Namely, that down there, at the coal face, where science gets translated into actual help for pain and disease, the great principles of scientific thought still apply: understanding a physical system so clearly that it is possible to think creatively within it. James Black's discovery in the early 60s of beta blockers for the treatment of heart disease and high blood pressure heralded the invention of other inhibitors effective in the treatment of diverse diseases; leukemia, malaria, herpes, bacterial infections, kidney stones. Nasty conditions which are now less threatening.

