

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

A healthy initiative

Otis Bowen's visit helps advance what is already the most active focus of Indo-U.S. joint research.

The ten-day tour of U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Otis Bowen, at the invitation of India's Minister for Human Resource Development Narasimha Rao, ended April 22. Dr. Bowen is the first American health secretary to visit India in spite of the fact that Indo-U.S. cooperation in health and biomedical sciences is extensive and longstanding.

Bowen's aim was to review and formulate further joint projects in consultation with his counterpart and medical professionals here. Talks with Mr. Rao, whose charge includes Health and Family Welfare, produced a joint statement outlining stepped-up cooperation in three areas: AIDS, vaccines, drug and alcohol abuse.

Bowen also signed a memorandum of understanding on the Vaccine Action Program (VAP), in particular, with Minister of State for Science and Technology K.R. Narayanan and visited the Indian Council of Medical Research, the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, and the National Institute of Immunology in Delhi. He also visited Madras and Bombay, where he toured health service units, hospitals, and research centers for cancer and tuberculosis.

Three areas of collaboration are due for a new thrust, according to reports of the visit. First, India and the

U.S. have agreed to coordinate efforts to combat AIDS. Joint work, the details of which are to be developed in subsequent meetings, is expected to include surveillance for AIDS cases, development of improved diagnostics and confirmatory tests, and development of protocols to investigate the epidemiology and risk factors for the infection as well as cooperation in treatment, including improving the immune process and developing a vaccine. Bowen later emphasized that one of the first tasks would involve determining the character of the AIDS virus, whether it was the same the world over or had distinct regional variations.

The indications that serious epidemiological studies form a leading part in the collaboration is most promising. Indian medical professionals are well aware that the environmental factors prevalent in poor tropical developing countries have been written out of most studies of the disease in Europe and the U.S., with the result that the conclusions of such studies are of dubious value here.

It is not known how seriously Indian officials took Dr. Bowen's advice, offered to reporters at least, that a policy of testing visitors and immigrants to keep AIDS carriers out of the country was "impractical." The Indi-

an government has already begun implementing a policy of mandatory testing of foreign students, 80% of whom are from Africa and a total of 10 foreign students and tourists with the disease have been deported.

Some 100 cases of AIDS have already been identified within the country, in spite of an extremely limited screening capability and virtually no means to handle a rapid spread of the disease.

The VAP is also a priority focus of joint work, as part of the Science and Technology Initiative (STI) for accelerated collaboration in health, agriculture, and energy that was launched by President Reagan and the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1982. VAP was made a centerpiece of the joint research agenda in 1985, when President Reagan and Rajiv Gandhi renewed the STI for three more years.

The VAP will sponsor joint research and development of technologies for new and improved vaccines and provide support for quality control in expanded production and utilization of the vaccine. Areas of focus will be diarrheal diseases—still the most potent killers of infants and children in India and other developing nations—acute respiratory infection, malaria, hepatitis, and rabies. A group of experts is to be formed to identify specific projects.

Bowen's visit was preceded by a three-day trip to Washington in November by Prof. A.S. Paintal, the new director general of the Indian Council of Medical Research, India's premier medical institution. Paintal had been invited by U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop to follow up on the recommendation for collaboration in health and biomedical sciences outlined during the last meeting of the Indo-U.S. Science and Technology Subcommittee in Washington last September.