Frogs Out of Hot Water

Top Frenchies won’t fry in blood debacle

June 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

“Je ne sais quoi” said the French blood trade in 1985, and politicians still buck responsibility for the 4,400 people infected through tainted transfusions.

March saw the acquittal of three former top French officials—Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, Social Affairs Minister Georgina Dufoix and Health Minister Edmond Hervé—on charges of criminal negligence and manslaughter. They had been accused of delaying the use of a U.S. blood-screening test in order to give a French company time to develop its own. Abbott Labs’ test became available in March 1985, but it wasn’t until August of that year that France started screening donors using a test by Diagnostics Pasteur.

Fabius, now speaker of the parliament, said he “was not responsible for the decision to block the Abbott test,” and he “was being attacked on the basis of scientific knowledge that was not clear in 1985.” Luc Montagnier and other members of the French research team that isolated HIV were called to the stand, but their conflicting views about what and when the government knew about AIDS only added fireworks to the trial. The court found Hervé guilty of manslaughter, but imposed no sentence, ruling that the 10-year scandale had robbed him of his right to be presumed innocent.

“Politicians are like gangsters,” said Sylvie Rouy, an infected plaintiff. “If you don’t catch them in the cookie jar, you never get them.

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