

In brief**Doctors' union urges its members to heed patients' wishes:**

Doctors must respect the wishes of competent adult patients, however illogical or unusual they may seem, according to a new booklet, *Consent to Treatment*, published by the Medical Defence Union in London.

Table dancer receives surgery for human bite:

A Bavarian table dancer received emergency surgery for necrotising fasciitis after he was bitten on the leg by a woman reveller at the Oktoberfest in Munich, reports the *Lancet* (1999;354:572).

Pregnant women in England to be offered HIV test:

All pregnant women in England are to be offered an HIV test to help to reverse the increase in the number of babies born with the virus. Women will be strongly advised to have the test as part of the routine antenatal screening, although there will be no compulsion, the Department of Health said.

Cumbrian childhood leukaemia linked with infection not radiation:

The cluster of childhood leukaemia cases near Sellafield in Cumbria is likely to have been caused by a common unidentified infection triggered by population mixing, according to a new study by Newcastle University published in the *British Journal of Cancer* (1999;8:141-51). The findings confirm earlier research suggesting the population mix theory. Fears that the cluster was linked with radiation from the nuclear power station at Sellafield were dismissed by a government inquiry in 1984.

Film trailers exceed recommended noise levels:

Cinema goers suffer "potentially dangerous" noise levels, the British Standards Institution in London warned last week. Trailers for films such as *Armageddon*, *Lethal Weapon 4*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Star Wars: the Phantom Menace* frequently exceed the recommended maximum noise level of 82 dB. Trailers reach average levels of 88 dB but can be as high as 95 dB.

Irish doctors protest over pay and conditions

Doug Payne *Dublin*

Hundreds of junior doctors staged demonstrations outside hospitals across the Republic of Ireland last week to protest against the state of the country's health service. The unofficial coordinated protests in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Galway—the second wave in two months—came in advance of a planned march by medical staff on the Irish legislature on 11 September. The doctors leading last week's protest issued a seven point plan

demanding that concerns over pay, conditions, training of post-graduate doctors, and public concerns about the health service be addressed without delay.

The country's junior doctors currently work an official week of 65 hours but regularly work 100 hours or more, including non-stop shifts of 72 hours. The lunchtime action on 11 August, which did not affect services at any of the hospitals concerned, was intended to highlight what doctors said was the "lack of commitment to patient care" from Brian Cowen, the minister of health.

Although the latest protests were spearheaded by junior doctors (non-consulting hospital doctors (NCHDs)) they are supported by more senior col-

leagues. Both groups are furious at the government's agreement with the recent move by the European Union to defer the introduction of the 48 hour week. An editorial in the current edition of the *Irish Medical Times* (1999;33(33):25) says: "Quite apart from the fact that it is not good enough that patient care should be provided by over-worked and exhausted NCHDs, it is not acceptable either that NCHDs should be exploited by hospital authorities in a bid to provide such patient care on the cheap. What is at issue is not the number of hours which NCHDs can be expected to work before their clinical skills and judgement become impaired, but how medical cover can be most cheaply provided for hospitals." □

Life expectancy of Russian men falls to 58

James Ciment *New York*

The transition to market economies in many post-communist societies of the former Soviet Union and other former eastern bloc countries in Europe has produced a "demographic collapse," a recent report by the United Nations Development Programme has found. Among the most serious findings is a four year drop in life expectancy among Russian men since 1980, from 62 years to 58.

The development programme's report also noted significant drops in life expectancy in Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania. The immediate cause of the rising mortality, said the report, is the "rise in self-destructive behaviour, especially among men." Old problems such as alcoholism have increased; drug misuse—a relatively new problem in the former communist bloc—has risen dramatically in recent years. The report *Transition 1999* stated that suicide rates have climbed steeply too, by 60% in Russia, 80% in Lithuania, and 95% in Latvia since 1989.

But behind the self destructive behaviour, the authors say, are economic factors, including rising poverty rates, unemployment, financial insecurity, and corruption. Whereas only 4% of

the population of the region had incomes equivalent to \$4 (£2.50) a day or less in 1988, that figure had climbed to 32% by 1994. In addition, the transition to a market economy has been accompanied by lower living standards (including poorer diets), a deterioration in social services, and major cutbacks in health spending.

"What we are arguing," said Omar Noman, an economist for the development fund and one of the report's contributors, "is that the transition to market economies [in the region] is the biggest ... killer

we have seen in the 20th century, if you take out famines and wars. The sudden shock and what it did to the system ... has effectively meant that five million [Russian men's] lives have been lost in the 1990s." Using Britain and Japan—with their ratio of 96 men to every 100 women—as the base population, the report's authors have calculated that there are now some 9.6 million "missing men" in the former communist bloc. "The typical patterns are that a man loses his job and develops a drinking problem," said Mr Noman. "The women then leave and the men die, first emotionally and then physically."

Overall, the Russian death rate from accidents—most of them involving alcohol—has risen 83% since 1991. □



Cold comfort from free markets for men in former eastern bloc