

In brief

Dutch government may sue tobacco companies: The Dutch health minister, Els Borst, is investigating the chances of claiming damages from tobacco manufacturers to help pay for antismoking campaigns. The move follows similar claims in the United States.

UK to review generic drugs market: The Department of Health has asked Oxford Economic Research Associates to analyse the generic drug manufacturing and supply industry and the wider pattern of relationships for wholesaling and retail of medicines for the NHS (1 January, p 7). The Office of Fair Trading is examining whether there is evidence of anticompetitive practices in existing systems.

UK organ donors reach eight million: There are now over eight million people on the NHS Organ Donor Register, which was set up five years ago. At the end of October 1999 there were 5443 patients waiting for a kidney, pancreas, heart, lung, or liver.

London council fails children: The English health minister, John Hutton, has issued formal directions to Hackney council for failing to provide adequate services for children in its care, and it will have to produce an action plan by 11 January. He found that half the children were not visited at the frequency required, 24% had no care plan, and monthly visits to residential units were not being completed.

Members appointed to UK Human Genetics Commission: Baroness Helena Kennedy will chair the Human Genetics Commission, which will look at developments in human genetics, promote informed debate about their implications for health, and prepare advice for ministers. Other members include doctors, ethicists, and lawyers. It will hold an open meeting in April and has its own website (www.hgc.gov.uk).

News extra 
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Netherlands faces measles epidemic

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

The Dutch health ministry is urging parents to ensure their children are vaccinated against measles as the latest figures indicate an epidemic spreading across the country that has not yet peaked.

The national bureau for the coordination of communicable disease control has reported 1750 cases since April, compared with just nine for 1998. Forty children have been admitted to hospital with serious complications, including encephalitis, pneumonia, and ear and eye infections; three children have died.

The epidemic has broken out despite a 96% take up of the national measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine for babies over 14 months. The UK figure for take up of the MMR vaccine is estimated at 88%.

The Dutch health ministry said that in 99% of measles cases, children were not vaccinated owing to religious objections, concerns about claims of side

effects from the vaccine, forgetting, or not regarding it as important.

The Netherlands is regarded as unique in having a large population group, estimated at 300 000, belonging to a strict orthodox Protestant faith that has objections to immunisation.

In the so called Bible Belt, extending from the north east to south west of the country, where measles vaccination can be as low as 60%, there have been previous measles epidemics, the last in 1988.

In June this year five cases were reported to the communicable disease bureau, all from the same primary school, where only 7% of children were vaccinated. It emerged that 80 pupils were at home sick with measles.

By September, 304 cases had been reported, 301 of whom had not been vaccinated, 268 for religious reasons (*Eurosurveillance Weekly*, 30 September, www.euroserve.org). New cases

have now been reported from The Hague and Dordrecht in the provinces of South Holland and Zeeland.

Dr Frits Woonink, a specialist in infectious diseases with the Utrecht southeast community health services, who received the first reports of the epidemic, fears that in some areas as few as 25% of cases are reported and there could be 5000 cases across the country.

He said an important lesson could be learnt that even in a western European country, measles can have serious complications for children and there are good reasons to continue vaccination.

Dr Norman Begg, head of the immunisation division of the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre, north London, said that, while Britain did not have a religious group equivalent to that concentrated in the Bible Belt in the Netherlands, children who were not vaccinated were not uniformly spread across the country.

"These children are very much concentrated in inner city areas, especially parts of east and central London. That is where we would expect to see outbreaks occur." □

Inquiry discovers fraudulent skin treatments

Gavin Yamey *BMJ*

Non-regulated skin products with dangerous side effects are being widely marketed to patients with skin diseases, according to a report from the UK all party parliamentary group on skin.

The group, assisted by an advisory committee of skin specialists and patient representatives, collected written and oral evidence of fraudulent practice in the treatment of skin disease. It found examples of herbal products sold as "natural" remedies but containing potent synthetic steroids, products sold as cures which contained no active ingredients, and "clinics" giving harmful dietary advice.

One product, a mail order preparation called Skincap, was marketed to patients with psori-

asis at a cost of over £30 a week. The manufacturers claimed that it contained nothing more active than zinc pyrithione, yet patients reported dramatic resolution of their symptoms and used it long term. An independent analysis of the cream showed that it contained a potent topical steroid.

One London clinic charged £950 (\$1500) for a 50 g pot of cream to treat vitiligo. When analysed, this was found to be white soft paraffin with a small

amount of the steroid fluocinolone.

Other clinics offer people with eczema allergy tests of doubtful validity, using the results to advise patients to modify their diets.

The report criticises the Medicines Control Agency for its reluctance to prosecute fraudulent companies. □

Report on the Enquiry into Fraudulent Practice in the Treatment of Skin Disease, is available on 020 8789 2798, priced £15.



Eczema patients are offered allergy tests of doubtful validity