

In brief

NHS appoints new chief executive and permanent secretary: Nigel Crisp will take over as chief executive and permanent secretary of the NHS in England from 1 November. Mr Crisp, aged 48, who is at present regional NHS director for London, has worked in industry and the voluntary sector and joined the NHS in 1986.

First outbreak of Ebola virus confirmed in Uganda: The World Health Organization, with its partners in the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network, is coordinating the international response to an outbreak of Ebola virus disease in the Gulu district, northern Uganda.

Agency warns on arthritis drug: The European Medicines Evaluation Agency has urged doctors to exercise caution when prescribing etanercept (Enbrel), Wyeth's treatment for rheumatoid arthritis, after 10 reports of serious blood reactions, five of them fatal.

BMA gold medal awarded to Sir Anthony Grabham: The BMA's council has awarded its gold medal for distinguished merit to Sir Anthony Grabham. Sir Anthony chaired the Central Consultants and Specialists Committee from 1975 to 1979; the BMA's council from 1979 to 1984; and the Joint Consultants Committee from 1984 to 1990; and is now chairman of the journal committee.

Young Americans support parental consent for abortion: Two thirds of young Americans aged 18 to 24 who are due to vote in the forthcoming presidential election support legislation to require girls aged under 18 to obtain parental consent before having an abortion, according to poll results released last week.

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Tampons could be used to diagnose STDs

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Tampons can be used to detect some sexually transmitted diseases with greater efficacy than traditional swab methods, according to the results of a new study.

Specimens collected during invasive speculum examination have long been necessary for the conventional laboratory diagnosis of vaginal discharge diseases. Recently, the emphasis has been on molecular diagnosis of vaginal discharge diseases on non-invasive, self collected specimens to enable screening of large populations. Tampons absorb fluid in the vagina that can later be tested for several sexually transmitted diseases, including chlamydia and gonorrhoea.

In the current study Dr Patrick Sturm of the University of Natal in South Africa and colleagues cultured vaginal swabs collected during specu-

lum examination and compared them with the diagnostic tampon on 1030 women who had no symptoms of infection. A discrepancy analysis was performed to detect technical errors, as well as absence of patients' material on the tampon and other factors that might cause discordant results.

True *Trichomonas vaginalis* infection was defined by a positive culture during speculum examination or, if a discrepancy arose, by repeatedly positive results on polymer chain reaction testing. The tampon proved to be equally effective at identifying women infected with *T vaginalis*, one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases that are often accompanied by vaginal discharge. Dr Sturm reported the results at a recent meeting

sponsored by the American Society for Microbiology in Toronto, Canada.

In the study the tampon detected 247 cases of trichomonas while the more traditional swab method detected only 191 cases. Dr Sturm said that the test is suitable for screening and surveillance purposes because of the high sensitivity in asymptomatic women and the use of non-invasive, self collected specimens.

The researchers believe that using tampons in this way will be beneficial for several reasons. It allows women to do this test at home and avoid the embarrassment of going to a clinic. It provides researchers with a tool for undertaking more widespread population testing. Potentially, the tampon specimens can also be used for other diagnostic methods. □

Hepatitis C victims sue NHS in class action

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

More than 100 patients who became infected with the hepatitis C virus through blood transfusions, blood products, and organ transplants are suing the blood authorities in England and Wales, in an action that could cost the NHS millions of pounds.

The hearing, which started in the High Court in London last week, is expected to last three months. Six "lead" cases have been chosen to represent the 112 claimants, most of whom are receiving legal aid.

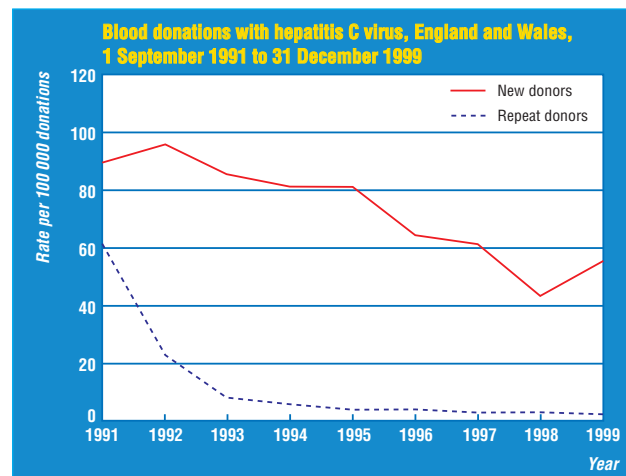
The case is the first group action to be brought under the

Consumer Protection Act 1987, which introduced strict product liability into UK law for the first time. The act, designed to implement the EC product liability directive, made manufacturers and suppliers liable for defects in their products without the need to prove negligence.

But the legislation has not been widely used since it came into force on 1 March 1988. Hepatitis C virus was identified two months later in May 1988. Lawyers for the claimants argue that the United Kingdom, which lagged behind some other countries in introducing screening procedures, should have acted sooner.

Michael Brooke QC, for the claimants, told Mr Justice Burton that the court "may have to consider the introduction of safety procedures to reduce the risk to people of being infected with the virus by blood and blood products, both as it in fact progressed in this country and as it could have done."

The act says that products are defective if they are not as safe as people generally are entitled to expect, taking all circumstances into account. The claimants argue that from March 1988 people generally did not expect to catch serious infections from blood transfusions. □



Should the United Kingdom have started screening donated blood sooner than it did?