

In brief

Tobacco company under DTI investigation: Investigators have been appointed by the UK Department of Trade and Industry to study claims that British American Tobacco (BAT) has been involved in cigarette smuggling.

UK doctors would prescribe cannabis: Most UK doctors believe that cannabis laws are too strict, but only one in three believes the drug should be legalised, according to a survey by a medical website, Medix-UK.com.

Nestlé audit criticised: The Network for Consumer Protection in Pakistan has criticised the external audit commissioned by Nestlé into its food marketing practices in Pakistan. The audit concluded that "the operations of Nestlé Milpak are in compliance with the letter and the spirit of the WHO code [of marketing of breast milk substitutes]" (1 July, p 8). But the network said that the auditors were unfamiliar with the code and found the audit's conclusions "unconvincing."

Trekking is good for you: Trekking round the world is less risky than staying at home, according to a study of 246 expeditions over three years published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (2000;93:557-62). Researchers found higher rates of medical incidents at rock festivals and scout camps.

UK health department to inquire into cold remedy: The UK Medicines Control Agency is to review the safety of phenylpropanolamine (PPA), which is found in many cold and flu medicines. The US Food and Drug Administration has banned the drug after it was said to have been responsible for strokes in young women. The quantity of PPA in UK products is much lower than in the United States.

bmj.com

News extra

More news stories are available on the BMJ's website

Dutch GP cleared after helping to end man's "hopeless existence"

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

Doctors in the Netherlands fear a legal test case has stretched the conditions under which euthanasia and assisted suicide may be practised. A court in Haarlem has accepted that an 86 year old man obsessed with his "physical decline" and "hopeless existence" was suffering "hopelessly and unbearably"—one of four criteria protecting doctors against prosecution.

Though he had no serious physical or psychiatric illness, his GP was acquitted after helping him to commit suicide. The public prosecution service had called for the GP to be given a three month suspended prison sentence. A spokesman for the Royal Dutch Medical Association, said the definition of "unbearable suffering" had been "stretched too far." He said: "What is new is that it goes beyond physical or psychiatric illness to include social decline. We are concerned this judgment will marginalise the role of the GP."

Edward Brongersma had first made a written euthanasia declaration in 1984. He had expressed his wish to Dr Philip Sutorius, his GP since 1986, on at least eight occasions. A month before his suicide in April 1998 he said that death had "forgotten" him, his friends and relatives were dead, and he experienced "a pointless and empty existence." A second medical opinion confirmed that he was suffering hopelessly, and a psychiatrist said he had no treatable psychiatric illness.

The public prosecution accepted that Dr Sutorius is a conscientious GP, confronted with a difficult request, which he addressed with prudence and professionalism. The prosecution recognised that he fulfilled all the other legal criteria but denied there was "hopeless and unbearable suffering." Mr Brongersma's request should therefore have been refused. Three medical experts asked to

review the case concluded, however, that Mr Brongersma was suffering unbearably and there was no possible medical treatment.

Professor of medical ethics Inez de Beaufort of the public health department of Erasmus University, Rotterdam, recognised that no medical-ethical consensus exists. But he argued that such suffering could be characterised by the lack of prospects for improvement and general hopelessness. The court accepted "good medical-ethical arguments" that Mr Brongersma suffered "unbearably" and therefore Dr Sutorius made a justifiable choice between his obligations to maintain life and to relieve suffering. The Dutch medical association believes that more debate is required. Justice minister Benk Korthals has said that being "tired of life" is not sufficient reason for euthanasia. The public prosecutions office is to appeal to the High Court. MPs are divided, with governing coalition members supporting the judgment and those from the opposition Christian parties fearing it could allow euthanasia for anyone who is "ready to die." □

Condom use in England rises sixfold

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

The condom could overtake the contraceptive pill as the most popular form of contraception in England after a sixfold increase was reported in the number of people choosing the sheath for birth control in the past 25 years. The proportion of people attending family planning clinics who chose condoms as their preferred method of contraception rose from 6% in 1975 to 36% in 1999-2000, according to a survey of NHS contraception services.

This compares with a steady decline in the use of the contraceptive pill: in 1975 70% of women using contraceptive services opted for the pill compared with 43% in 1999-2000. The survey found that in all but the 16-19 age group, the popularity of the pill never recovered

from the 1995 "pill scare."

The use of emergency contraception increased by 10% over the past year, with 240 000 prescriptions issued in 1999-2000 compared with 38 000 a decade ago.

Among younger women the use of emergency contraceptive services rose by 17% between

1998 and 1999-2000, said Margaret Jones, chief executive of Brook Advisory Centres. Although this might reduce the teenage pregnancy rate, it suggests that many people are having unprotected sex, which is reflected in the increase in sexually transmitted diseases, she commented. □

