

doctors to decide which women need more aggressive treatment, according to researchers.

Dr Bruce Turner of the Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and colleagues looked at 122 women with early stage breast cancer. They found that 82% of women who had tumours that contained high levels of a protein called BAG-1 were still alive 10 years after being diagnosed with cancer, compared with 42% of women whose tumours contained low levels of the protein. BAG-1 is a protein involved in cell division and survival (*Journal of Clinical Oncology* 2001;19:992-1000).

"The important finding from this study is that BAG-1 is an important predictor of survival in patients who have pathologically negative lymph nodes and are at a low risk of developing metastatic disease," said Dr Turner.

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Israeli doctors may now use cadavers for training purposes

A new amendment to Israel's 1954 anatomy and pathology law now allows doctors to practise medical procedures on cadavers if the deceased person granted written permission in advance or the family consented after the person's death.

New rules have been issued by the health ministry's director general, Dr Boaz Lev. In addition to this written permission, three physicians must sign a document stating that the procedure was aimed at treating patients, and only procedures on a specified list are permitted.

In addition, if organs for transplant are to be taken from the cadaver, medical procedures for training doctors may not be performed if this will jeopardise the organ donation.

Moreover, medical procedures will not be allowed on deceased people who were homeless, were foreign workers, or did not have family in Israel, Dr Lev added.

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich *Jerusalem*

Catalans push for therapeutic use of cannabis

All five political parties in the Catalan parliament in Spain have signed a proposal to legalise the use of cannabis for therapeutic purposes. The agreement asks the Catalan government to negotiate with the Spanish authorities so that cannabis—either as a drug or as a standardised extract of the plant—may be used to treat medical disorders.

Once the bill is approved in the Catalan parliament, it may be submitted to the Spanish parliament for discussion and eventual voting.



The initiative came from a collective of 300 women with breast cancer called the "Agata group" (after Saint Agata, who had her breasts removed under torture) and from a journalist, Nuria Noguera, who recently died of the disease and who found the drug helpful during chemotherapy. Since last September, the Agata collective has held meetings with representatives of the five Catalan parties, as well as with the Catalan health department, oncologists, and pharmacologists.

After these meetings, all political parties agreed to draft and release a consensus report to the Catalan parliament to decriminalise the therapeutic use of cannabis. But the measure, even if approved in the Catalan parliament—as is forecast—can take effect only if the Spanish ministry of health gives the go-ahead. The ministry is the only body with the power to authorise new drugs in Spain.

Xavier Bosch *Barcelona*

Breast feeding safer than mixed feeding for babies of HIV mothers

Jacqui Wise *London*

Among babies of mothers infected with HIV, those exclusively breast fed for three months or more have no excess risk of HIV infection over six months than those who have never been breast fed, according to latest research. The results could have important implications for public health policy in developing countries, where the total avoidance of breast feeding is not a realistic option for the vast majority of women.

Anna Coutoudis from the department of paediatrics and child health at the University of Natal, South Africa, carried out a prospective cohort study involving 551 pregnant women infected with HIV who chose whether to breast feed exclusively, use formula feed exclusively, or carry out mixed feeding after being counselled (*AIDS* 2001;15:379-87).

In 1999 Dr Coutoudis published the early results of the study in the *Lancet* (1999;354:471-6). The infants have now been followed up for 15 months, and the results confirm that infants exclusively breast fed had no excess risk of maternal transmission of HIV over six months when compared with infants who were not breast fed at all. Those at greatest risk were the infants fed on a mixture of breast milk and other foods and liquids.

Dr Coutoudis concluded: "If these results are confirmed, then the public health benefits for

HIV infected women in developing countries is considerable."

The study is the first to separate women who exclusively breast feed from those who carry out mixed feeding. The mechanism through which exclusive breast feeding may be safer than mixed feeding is not known. Dr Coutoudis said: "We favour the hypothesis that contaminated fluids and foods introduced in [babies who received mixed feeding] damage the bowel and facilitate entry into the tissues of HIV in breast milk."

Patti Rundall, policy director of the pressure group Baby Milk Action, believes the new study has important implications. Bottle feeding was not a realistic policy for many women because of the costs and lack of clean water.

"It is estimated that 1.7 million babies have been passed the HIV virus through breast milk, but this has to be compared with the 1.5 million babies who die every year because they are not breast fed."

Dr Felicity Savage, of the Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development at the World Health Organization (WHO), said: "The study... is not good enough to enable the WHO to recommend that HIV positive women breast feed exclusively as first choice." □

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