

site. The province's chief medical health officer later said that cryptosporidium was not the cause of two of the deaths but may have played a minor part in the third.

After last year's pollution of the water supply of Walkerton, Ontario, by a strain of *Escherichia coli* that made 2000 people ill and caused seven deaths, Saskatchewan's incident prompted water experts across the country to call for a national review of all aspects of water resources.

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

US approves new anti-leukaemia drug

A new oral drug to treat chronic myeloid leukaemia has been approved in record time by the US Food and Drug Administration.



AP PHOTO/RENE TH LAMBERT

At a news conference in Washington, DC, attended by the US secretary of health and human services, Tommy Thompson (above), and the director of the National Cancer Institute, Dr Richard Klausner, the administration announced its approval of imatinib mesylate (Gleevec).

The new drug, manufactured by Novartis of Basle, Switzer-

land, was approved after a review of the clinical data lasting only two and a half months. The drug has also proved effective against rare gastrointestinal stromal tumours and small-cell lung cancers. Imatinib mesylate has been developed during 16 years of research that began in 1985 at Ciba-Geigy, a predecessor of Novartis.

To date, the new drug has been studied in more than 7500 patients at 490 sites in 30 countries. According to the National Cancer Institute, it was designed in the laboratory to target an abnormal version of a normal cellular protein, present in nearly all patients with chronic myeloid leukaemia.

The abnormal protein is much more active than the normal protein and is probably the cause of the disease. By blocking the abnormal protein, BCR-ABL, the drug kills the leukaemia cells.

Fred Charatan *Florida*

US cancer care is worse due to more paperwork

US cancer specialists are calling for reform of administrative measures designed to reduce healthcare fraud that have resulted in so much paperwork that patient care is suffering, according to results from a survey presented earlier this week.

The survey of more than 2500 clinical oncologists showed that the amount of time they spend filling out paperwork and documenting patient care has increased more than fourfold over the past 25 years.

The average time spent with patients remained constant over this period, but the doctors taking part in the survey considered that far more of this time is now spent in documenting information judged to be extraneous to the reason for the consultation.

The study, carried out by the American Society of Clinical Oncology, also showed that the time spent carrying out clinical research and teaching medical residents had decreased by nearly half.

Susan Mayor *San Francisco*

Shipman inquiry to investigate 466 deaths

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

At least 466 deaths will be investigated by the public inquiry into the British serial killer GP Harold Shipman, the inquiry chairwoman, High Court judge Dame Janet Smith, announced last week.

Dame Janet said that the inquiry would try to contact relatives of a further 152 former patients, for whom death certificates were signed by Shipman but relatives raised no concerns.

Speaking to relatives of known and suspected victims of the GP at a public meeting in Manchester ahead of the start of the inquiry next month, she said she would try to reach individual decisions on each suspicious death. The number of 466 could increase, but the figure should not be seen as an estimate of the number of his victims, she emphasised.

"I anticipate there will be many cases in which I will be able to say there is no cause for suspicion. However, it will not be possible in every case for me to say one way or the other. Much will depend on the availability of the evidence."

Shipman had been asked to assist the inquiry, but his solicitors had indicated that he did not wish to be involved, she said. She was not prepared to say whether she would compel him to attend hearings.

She said that the home secre-

tary had granted permission for inquests into the deaths of 260 patients, which were among those to be investigated by the inquiry. The inquests would be adjourned after opening, and the coroner would be able to amend the death certificates in the light of the inquiry's interim report without the need for the inquests to be resumed.

Shipman, now aged 55, Britain's most prolific serial killer, was convicted last year of murdering 15 middle aged and elderly women patients with fatal injections of diamorphine. Police had enough evidence to charge him with another 24 murders, but the director of public prosecutions decided that another trial would not be in the public interest. An audit of his practice last year concluded that the most likely number of victims was 236.

Last week the former GP was questioned by detectives for more than 30 hours over the deaths of nine patients from Todmorden, West Yorkshire, where he practised from 1974 to 1976.

The inquiry, to be held at Manchester Town Hall, is expected to take two years. Dame Janet said that she hoped to deliver an interim report by the end of the year and a full report with recommendations on steps to be taken to protect future patients by spring 2003. □



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Dame Janet Smith said that she would not be able to say in every case whether there was any cause for suspicion