

In brief**WHO calls on private sector to provide cheap hearing aids:**

The World Health Organization is asking the private sector to provide affordable hearing aids for the 250 million people worldwide with hearing loss who cannot afford current prices. Hearing aid manufacturers, service providers, and donors came together for a meeting in Geneva last week to evaluate the possibility of a private-public partnership.

Sildenafil no longer covered by HMOs in California: Health maintenance organisations (HMOs) in California are no longer obliged to pay for sildenafil (Viagra), the drug for male impotence, following a ruling by Sacramento Superior Court Judge Lloyd Connelly. The ruling was in response to a 1998 petition by Kaiser Permanente Medical Center, the state's largest HMO, to exclude coverage for the drug.

UK government sets up mental health institute in England: The UK Department of Health has established a National Institute for Mental Health in England, to be led by Professor Louis Appleby, national director for mental health, and to be located in the NHS Modernisation Agency. It will develop a national research plan and set up a network of leading institutions to work collaboratively.

Risk of prostate cancer rises with number of partners: The risk of prostate cancer in middle aged men increases directly in relation to the lifetime number of female sexual partners they have had, a new study said (*American Journal of Epidemiology* 2001;153:1152-8). Men with 30 or more sexual partners had more than twice the risk.

Russia sees sharp rise in AIDS cases: Nikolai Mashkilleison, coordinator of HIV and AIDS programmes in Russia, announced last week that the number of HIV cases in Russia is now 50% higher than at the beginning of 2001. He said that there are now 129 261 people registered with HIV. Other estimates put the number as high as 700 000.

Tobacco company claims that smokers help the economyZosia Kmietowicz *London*

Smokers are doing their country a huge favour by boosting tax revenue, dying early, and not drawing a pension, according to a report by the tobacco giant Philip Morris.

Officials in the Czech Republic have been given an analysis, commissioned by the cigarette manufacturer, which suggests that the economic benefits of smoking to the country far outweigh the harmful effects. Rather than being a drain on healthcare resources, smoking actually saves the country more than £100m (\$140m) a year because of the premature death of smokers, concluded the Massachusetts based consulting firm Arthur D Little International, which carried out the analysis.

It worked out that the early

death of smokers saved the government up to £21.5m on health care, pensions, and housing for elderly people in 1999. The auditors also calculated how much the country spent on caring for people with smoking related diseases and the income tax lost when smokers die. Overall the net profit made by the government, including the revenues from tobacco tax, in 1999 came to £102.3m.

Philip Morris moved into the Czech Republic almost a decade ago and now owns nearly 80% of the former state tobacco company, Tabak, selling its flagship Marlboro cigarettes alongside local brands. The company said that it received the report at the end of last year and made it available to officials in the Czech Republic after they complained

about the enormous burden that smoking was placing on their healthcare resources.

"This is an economic impact study, no more, no less," said Robert Kaplan, a spokesman for Philip Morris's international tobacco unit in Rye Brook, New York.

Its attitude was criticised by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a US antismoking lobby group. "Philip Morris's only interest is its own bottom line, not the protection of our children or the public health, and this report shows the lengths to which it is willing to go to get its way when it thinks no one is watching," said its president, Matthew Myers.

He added: "It is the same Philip Morris that has been invited by the Bush administration to negotiate a settlement to the federal tobacco lawsuit. A company that goes out of its way to rationalise as a good thing the fact that its products kill people does not deserve such a seat at the table." □

US abortion clinics afraid of new violenceFred Charatan *Florida*

Abortion clinics in the United States want greater safeguards because of what they feel are growing threats of violence against them and their staff.

Three abortion rights organisations—Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the National Abortion Federation, and the Feminist Majority Foundation—have called on President Bush's attorney general, John Ashcroft, to speak out against threats of violence at abortion clinics.

Their concerns are fuelled partly by a ruling from the federal appeals court in San Francisco earlier this year that threats posted on the internet against abortion providers were protected by the constitution (7 April, p 818).

They are also concerned that John Ashcroft was an ardent critic of abortion as Republican senator from Missouri. He has said, however, that his views on abortion would not prevent him from enforcing a 1994 law that



Anti-abortionist Flip Benham addresses a rally in Wichita, Kansas

makes violence at abortion clinics a federal crime.

Meanwhile, James Kopp, who faces charges that he shot to death Dr Barnett Slepian, the New York obstetrician who had performed abortions, in 1998 has yet to be extradited from France. He was arrested last April after two and a half years on the run. Two anti-abortionists arrested in New York for helping Kopp to evade capture have not yet come to trial.

Of more direct concern to the abortion clinics is a planned week of protest by anti-abortionists in

Wichita, Kansas, which began on 14 July to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the 1991 "summer of mercy" protests, which resulted in 2700 arrests.

Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation, said: "With Operation Save America (formerly Operation Rescue) kicking off their Let's Finish It campaign in Wichita, Kansas, and outspoken terrorist Clayton Lee Waagner on the loose, heavily armed, and threatening the lives of clinic staff across the country, time is of the essence," she said. □