

In brief

Lariam suicide warning:

Hoffman-La Roche has issued a website warning about suicidal ideation and suicide with its antimalarial drug mefloquine (Lariam). US army officials are investigating the possible role of mefloquine in murders and suicides among soldiers in North Carolina who served in Afghanistan. The company has settled a lawsuit for wrongful death with an Ohio woman whose husband killed himself after they both took mefloquine on a holiday to Africa.

Dutch drug misuse increases:

In line with international trends, drug misuse in the Netherlands continues to gradually increase, according to a survey last year of 18 000 Dutch teenagers and adults by Amsterdam University's Centre for Drugs Use. Overall, 17% of people had used cannabis, compared with 15.6% four years ago. The proportion of 20-24 year olds who had "ever used" cannabis or cocaine increased from 32% to 42% and from 3.9% to 8.6% respectively.

College investigates death after surgery:

A woman who had to have a second operation after surgeons mistakenly put a prosthesis for a right knee into her left leg has died. Orthopaedic operations at the Prince Charles General Hospital in Merthyr Tydfil, Wales, have been suspended, and the Royal College of Surgeons is investigating the incident.

Vitamins and mineral supplements under investigation:

The UK Food Standards Agency is to look into safe upper levels of vitamin and mineral supplements. The move is welcomed by the UK Council for Responsible Nutrition, which represents the manufacturers of food supplements.

Outpatient non-attendance falls:

The proportion of patients in England and Wales who did not attend (and failed to cancel) their first outpatient hospital appointment in 2001-2 fell to 10.9% from 11.1% in 2000-1, according to figures from the Department of Health (www.doh.gov.uk/hospitalactivity).

GP struck off after offering to "fix" kidney sale

Owen Dyer *London*

A GP was last week struck off after the General Medical Council's professional conduct committee found him guilty of offering to "fix" a kidney transplantation in return for a donor's fee and his own "administration costs."

Dr Bhagat Singh Makkar, 62, of Lewisham, London, offered to find a living kidney donor for a journalist posing as the son of a seriously ill man. Dr Makkar was not aware that the conversation was being recorded.

The GMC also confirmed that another doctor, Dr Jarnail Singh of Coventry, will this October face charges of organ trafficking in an unrelated case, whose details are not yet publicly available.

Freelance journalist Paul Samrai, working for the *Sunday Times*, contacted Dr Makkar while investigating organ trafficking, after getting his name from a doctor in Jalandhar, northern India.



Dr Bhagat Singh Makkar

ENTERPRISE NEWS AND PICTURES/MARK ST GEORGE

Bradley Martin, for the GMC, told the hearing that the case involved "firstly, a live kidney donor; secondly, a donor who was unrelated to the patient; thirdly, a fee for the kidney to be paid to the donor; and fourthly, ... circumstances where there was no caution or warning about the dangers of transplants between unrelated people."

The GMC also contended that Dr Makkar's actions were unprofessional, irresponsible, not in the best interests of the patient, and contrary to 1992 GMC guidelines and the Human Organ Transplants Act

1989. Dr Makkar may now face criminal charges for breaching that act.

The GMC listened to recordings and transcripts of the English and Punjabi conversations, in which Dr Makkar said: "No problem, I can fix that for you. Do you want it done here, in Germany, or in India?" Explaining that Britain was cheaper than Germany, he continued: "Asian donors are available here—I find them. I know the consultant at Guy's Hospital."

Handing Mr Samrai a brochure about his new company, Health International Services, Dr Makkar explained he was retiring from general practice that evening, to "manage operations." In a later telephone conversation, Mr Samrai speculated that a British Asian donor would be expensive.

Dr Makkar was recorded answering, "It's who you know, where you know. In this field I'm working for last one year... finding the good deals, where is the cheapest." He continued: "In south India, like in Bombay, Hyderabad, the donor will be less expensive than Punjab... in Bombay there are loads of poor people." □

Medical insurance crisis hits Australia's surgeons

Christopher Zinn *Sydney*

Up to 60% of Australia's surgeons are threatening to retire early and almost a third of trainees are planning to quit because of rising medical indemnity costs, a survey has found.

In the latest fallout from the continuing insurance crisis, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, which conducted the poll, warned that the mass exodus of surgeons would be catastrophic for the health system.

In April United Medical Protection, the country's largest medical indemnity insurer, went into provisional liquidation with a shortfall of \$A450m (£150m; \$US232m; €236m), leaving 32 000 members without cover (4 May, p 1057).

The survey of 1100 of the college's 3700 member surgeons in Australia and New Zealand found that 70% of surgeons expected their insurance premiums to rise by between 25% and 50% this year. And almost one in five surgeons said that if they retired there was no one to continue their particular service.

College president Professor Kingsley Faulkner said: "When premiums are being pushed up over \$A100 000, that is when doctors are saying 'enough is enough.'" He said the departures would devastate the health system. "Patients are already waiting months for elective surgery," he said.

"With fewer surgeons available to operate, waiting lists are going to get much worse. Emergency rosters will be difficult to maintain, and patients will be waiting years for surgery. It will be a gradual effect, but it will be significant over time."

In June the federal government guaranteed that doctors insured with United Medical Pro-

tection would have temporary malpractice cover until the end of 2002 and that it would work with doctors and the states to find a permanent solution.

● Doctors in the US (pictured below) are also calling for reform of malpractice insurance as hospital obstetrics departments are being forced to close because of soaring insurance costs. □



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