

London hospital slated for “chaotic” ultrasound service

The Commission for Health Improvement, the government's NHS watchdog, has branded the diagnostic screening service of a London hospital a “chaotic shambles,” in what is probably its most damning investigative report to date.

North London's Chase Farm Hospital had 2700 patients waiting for ultrasound scans when the commission decided to investigate it in February. Some of the referrals dated back more than a year.

It became, said the report, “routinely acceptable for ultrasound requests to be left unactioned. The unprocessed referrals were not hidden away and many staff at all levels knew that they were there.” Rather than discuss methods of cutting the backlog, staff worked around it by giving ultrasound scans when patients or GPs complained, regardless of clinical priority.

The commission discovered the waiting list during a routine clinical governance review of the trust. The decision to launch an investigation resulted in the resignation of the chief executive, Liz Hayer.

Owen Dyer *London*

Mandela calls for greater investment in global vaccination

Former South African president Nelson Mandela has called for action by private and public organisations to promote vaccination and save the 8000 children who die every day from diseases that can be prevented by vaccines.

His call follows publication of a World Health Organization report which highlights the growing gap between rich and poor countries in access to vaccination.

The report says that less than a quarter of Nigeria's children were vaccinated in 2000, half the

proportion of 10 years ago. Immunisation rates also plummeted in countries experiencing political upheaval and war.

It adds that the barriers to vaccination in developing countries include poor healthcare delivery systems, costs (especially of new vaccines), and research and development skewed towards rich nations. More than 30 million children born each year—one in four—do not receive any vaccination.

Jocelyn Clark *BMJ*

The State of the World's Vaccines and Immunization is available at www.who.int/mediacentre/events/report/en

Cancer specialist found guilty of misconduct

A publication in *Nature Medicine* by the cancer specialist Alexander Kugler and 14 other authors from Göttingen, Tübingen, and Berlin does not fulfil the criteria of good clinical practice. This is the verdict of a committee from Göttingen University, which was supported by four renowned external scientists.

In 2000 Kugler, then a senior registrar in the urology department of Göttingen University Hospital, had published a prizewinning clinical study claiming that kidney cancer can be treated effectively and safely with a vaccine (*Nature Medicine* 2000;6:332-6). The university decided to investigate the case, when he was accused of manipulating the data (*BMJ* 2001;323:184).

The committee has concluded that he was guilty of scientific misconduct. He was not diligent in his handling of data and did not care about its accuracy. For instance, patients were not actually chosen according to the published criteria. Moreover primary data were missing and the production of the vaccine was not sufficiently documented.

The other 14 authors were not found guilty of scientific misconduct, because Kugler did not communicate sufficiently with them. Kugler has left Göttingen University Hospital.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

National Audit Office report shows gaps in emergency planning

Susan Mayor *London*

A fifth of NHS hospital and ambulance trusts in England are inadequately prepared to cope with major terrorist incidents, warned a report published by the National Audit Office last week.

The report found that the NHS was well prepared to cope with previously encountered major incidents, such as rail and plane crashes, but that many hospital and ambulance trusts did not have adequate plans to deal with a major biological, chemical, or nuclear attack. Information was collected from surveys of all health authorities, acute trusts, and ambulance trusts in August 2001, February 2002, and October 2002. Response rates for the surveys were at least 60%.

Results showed that at least one in five major hospitals and ambulance services was “not well prepared” to deal with emergencies involving chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons or radioactive materials. These figures showed little progress from August 2001 in the 91 trusts that responded to both the 2002 surveys.

London was found to be better prepared after the 11 September 2001 attacks than before, but the October 2002 survey showed that a third of acute trusts and the London Ambulance Service were considered still “not well prepared” to deal with a major incident involving radioactivity. “A mass casualty incident or hazardous sub-

stances incident on a large scale would challenge the NHS in London,” the report stated.

The comptroller and auditor general, Sir John Bourn, who is head of the National Audit Office, said: “I recognise that there are limits to what can be done in improving readiness.

“However, the nature of the threats now potentially facing us means that the Department of Health and the chief executives of hospital, ambulance, and primary care trusts need to continue to act with determination to improve their planning and readiness.”

The report recommended that the Department of Health should provide guidance on how to develop plans for dealing with major incidents and commission a training strategy for dealing with major incidents, particularly incidents involving the deliberate release of hazardous substances.

The chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, replied: “While it is impossible to protect the public against every possible incident, the NHS is better prepared than ever—but we know there is still work to do.

“That is why we are in the process of creating a national agency—the Health Protection Agency.” □

Facing the Challenge: NHS Emergency Planning in England is available from the Stationery Office, tel 0845 702 3474 or at www.nao.gov.uk

