

# bmj.com news roundup

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## Cochrane launches global consultation on drug company sponsorship

The leadership of the international Cochrane Collaboration failed to make a decision on drug company sponsorship at last week's annual conference in Barcelona, opting instead for a complex consultation with its 10 000 members.

Professor Jim Neilson, who co-chairs the collaboration's steering group, told the *BMJ* a discussion paper will be released next month, and a final decision will be made in February. "The members have made it very clear they want to have input into this decision."

The Cochrane Collaboration produces systematic reviews of the evidence about healthcare interventions, but its supporters are deeply divided over how to manage their relationships with private companies, particularly drug manufacturers.

Professor Neilson said that a special email address would be set up to receive potentially thousands of responses.

Ray Moynihan *Barcelona*

## Test can predict which patients will benefit from hormonal treatments

A new test that is based on detecting the activity rather than just the quantity of oestrogen receptors in breast cells has shown promising results, indicating that the test may improve the accuracy of predicting which patients will benefit from hormonal treatments for breast cancer.

Hormonal treatments such as tamoxifen and anastrozole have greatly improved survival from breast cancer, because most breast cancers are stimulated by oestrogen. However, about 30% of patients with breast cancer in which oestrogen receptors are present do not respond to tamoxifen.



## French doctor at heart of euthanasia row faces murder charge

A French doctor who helped a severely disabled man to die could be charged with premeditated murder. Frédéric Chaussoy, the head of intensive care at the hospital of Berck-sur-Mer in northern France, made the decision at the end of September to switch off the life support machine of 22 year old Vincent Humbert after consulting his team.

State prosecutors are also questioning the mother of the handicapped fireman, Marie Humbert, 48 (pictured above with her sons Laurent, left, and Guillaume), who tried to help her son commit suicide by injecting him with barbiturates but who only succeeded in pushing him into a coma. Vincent Humbert had lost the use of his four limbs, his sight and speech following an accident three years ago.

Dr Chaussoy immediately took responsibility for his action. "I could have pretended he had a complication," he said. "We know very well how to lie; we do it regularly and could have continued with that traditional hypocrisy."

The lawyer representing Marie Humbert, Hugues Vigier, has condemned state prosecutors for considering charging Dr Chaussoy with "premeditated poisoning" – a crime that carries a life sentence.

Jane Burgermeister *Vienna*

The decision to use these drugs is currently based on tests for oestrogen receptors involving ligand binding or immunohistochemical techniques, which determine whether receptors are present but provide no information on their activity.

The new test uses a specially modified adenovirus, containing an oestrogen regulated  $\beta$  galactosidase reporter gene (a reporter gene is a nucleic acid sequence encoding an easily assayed protein), to assay oestrogen receptor function. Results of a study that used the assay in breast cancer cells from 18 patients with primary breast cancer and 16 patients with metastatic breast cancer showed that activity of oestrogen receptors was low, even though the

numbers of receptors were high in a fifth of the women (*International Journal of Cancer* 2003; 107:700-6).

Susan Mayor *London*

## Von Hagens faces investigation over use of bodies without consent

Gunther von Hagens, the pioneer of body plastination—the technique of preserving bodies by saturating them with polymer resin—and who was criticised for his televised autopsy in London, is under investigation in the former Soviet state of Kyrgyzstan and in Heidelberg, Germany.

He is accused of using bodies without permission and of falsely carrying the title of professor from Heidelberg University. He denies any illegal acts.

Since 1995 he has carried out plastination not only in his Heidelberg institute but also in a private institute in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital. After about 200 bodies of unexplained origin were recently found in his institute, a Kyrgyz member of parliament, Abakon Tashtanbekov, accused Professor von Hagens of having illegally abducted several hundred bodies from former Soviet prisons, hospitals, and psychiatric asylums. He said that in most cases relatives were not informed that the bodies were being sent to Professor von Hagens's institute.

When Professor von Hagens was recently questioned by a parliamentary committee in Kyrgyzstan, he said that only nine bodies were available from Kyrgyzstan. But he admitted that he did not know whether the families were informed about the death of their relatives.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

## Department of Health to cut two fifths of its staff

The health secretary, John Reid, has announced cuts that will see the number of staff at the Department of Health shrink by more than a third over the next 12 months.

Dr Reid said the plans to shed 1400 central staff—38% of the total—by October 2004 were the "most significant and ambitious ever undertaken by a Whitehall department."

He told the House of Commons health select committee's inquiry into public expenditure last week that he wanted to redirect savings to the front line of the NHS, reduce data collection, and move jobs away from London.

"I am amazed at the amount of information we collect. I have asked Sir Nigel [Nigel Crisp, chief executive of the NHS] to look at whether everything we collect needs to be collected."

Amanda Elliot *London*