

# bmj.com news roundup

Full versions of these stories are available at: [bmj.com/content/vol327/issue7424/#NEWS\\_ROUNDUP](http://bmj.com/content/vol327/issue7424/#NEWS_ROUNDUP)

## Local governments in US buy cheaper prescription drugs from Canada

High prices for prescription drugs have prompted widespread attempts to import drugs from Canada, where government controls make prices 20-80% lower than in the United States.

The lobby group the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), says that imports carry risks but admits that the US healthcare system leaves too many patients without access to the medicines they need.

Although drugs account for only 10% of healthcare costs, the amount has doubled since 1980 and drug prices have tripled. An estimated one to two million Americans buy prescription drugs from abroad.

Democratic mayor Michael Albano of Springfield, Massachusetts, set up a plan to import Canadian drugs for city employees and retired citizens and their dependants in July, in a bid to save the city as much as \$9m (£5.4m; €7.8m) a year.

Now the governors of states bordering Canada are planning to follow suit. Governor Rod Blagojevich of Illinois estimated that the state would save \$91m by buying drugs from Canada.

The Food and Drug Administration is trying to stop the practice on safety grounds, and the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy has warned: "Considering current world events, we believe it is dangerous to purchase medications from abroad."

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

## WHO tries to tackle problem of counterfeit medicines in Asia

Experts from the World Health Organization were in Hanoi this week to discuss ways of tackling the problem of counterfeit medicines with officials from countries in Asia's Mekong delta region.



## Congresswomen protest at partial abortion bill

Louise Slaughter, Democrat US congresswoman for the 28th Congressional district of New York state—and also a microbiologist with a master's degree in public health—leads a protest outside the Washington Supreme Court on 5 November after President George Bush's signing of the Partial Birth Abortion Bill.

The bill bans a type of abortion in which the physician "deliberately and intentionally vaginally delivers a living fetus until, in the case of a headfirst presentation, the entire fetal head is outside the body of the mother, or, in the case of breech presentation, any part of the fetal trunk past the navel is outside the body of the mother, for the purpose of performing an overt act that the person knows will kill the partially delivered living fetus." Between 2200 and 5000 abortions of this type are carried out each year.

Lynn Eaton *London*

WHO sees the problem of fake or substandard medicines as a serious public health threat in the "greater Mekong subregion," which includes Vietnam, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, China, Myanmar, and Thailand.

It hopes that the meetings will kick-start efforts to raise awareness among decision makers, health professionals, and the general public and to strengthen inspection and post-marketing surveillance.

Recent WHO estimates suggest that Cambodia has about 2800 illegal medicine sellers and 1000 unregistered medicines on the market. In 2001, China had roughly 500 illegal medicine manufacturers, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic had about 2100 illegal medicine sellers. In Thailand, substandard medicines account for 8.5% of those on the market.

The drugs most likely to be counterfeited in the region are those that treat diseases of most

serious concern, such as anti-malarial drugs, antibiotics, and tuberculosis drugs.

WHO estimates that as much as 10% of the world's drug trade—25% in poor countries—consists of counterfeits.

Stephen Pincock *London*

## Foundation hospitals plan defeated in Lords

Plans to create a "super league" of foundation hospitals have faced fresh opposition with a decisive defeat in the House of Lords last week.

The arrangements to give some English hospital trusts limited operational and financial freedom were to form the basis of the flagship Health and Social Care Bill.

But Labour and independent peers joined their Conservative and Liberal Democrat colleagues last week to defeat the

measure by 150 votes to 100.

Ministers had trimmed the plans heavily, hoping to ease the bill's passage through the House of Lords.

But peers described the plans as a "dog's breakfast," a "nightmare of democracy," and "beyond redemption," accusing foundation hospitals of creating a two tier NHS—with the chosen few predicted to swipe the bulk of funding from ordinary trusts.

A Department of Health spokeswoman said the government was still pressing ahead with its plans for foundation hospitals.

"We have already made concessions on over 100 points that have been made, but the Lords' comments will all go back into the bill for the Commons," she said. "We are confident we can have a majority again."

But the chairman of the House of Commons health select committee, David Hinchliffe, MP, a fierce opponent of foundation hospitals, hopes the government will give up on the plan.

"My hope is that the government will drop the foundation hospitals part of the bill—otherwise they could very easily lose the vote when it comes back to the Commons," he told the *BMJ*. "They're in serious danger of losing that majority of 34 they had last time."

Katherine Burke *London*

## Demand exceeds capacity for NHS Direct

NHS Direct is now so popular, with one million contacts a month, that some call centres are facing capacity problems.

According to a report by the health watchdog, the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI), some centres are missing, or close to missing, national targets to answer 90% of telephone calls within 30 seconds and to triage 90% of callers with symptoms within 20 minutes.

The report—the first independent national assessment of the five year old service—says it provides good quality advice and reassurance and is appreciated by the people who use it.

But demand is increasing,