

In brief**Tobacco advertising to be banned in Republic of Ireland:**

Tobacco advertising and sponsorship will be banned from 1 July in the Republic of Ireland, well in advance of the October 2001 deadline set by the European Union for introducing restrictions on advertising.

Japanese stay healthier longer:

The Japanese have the longest healthy life expectancy, according to a report from the World Health Organization. Of the 191 countries surveyed in 1999, Japan ranked first, with an average healthy life expectancy of 74.5 years; Britain ranked 14th, with a healthy life expectancy of 71.7 years, while Sierra Leoneans could expect only 26 years.

UK inquiry into disposal of babies' organs launched:

The UK health secretary, Alan Milburn, has launched an investigation into why hospital staff at King's Mill Hospital, Nottinghamshire, were reportedly ordered to dispose of babies' organs as clinical waste without relatives' permission.

Most European countries have no laws on patients' rights:

Six years after the World Health Organization's *Declaration on the Promotion of Patients' Rights in Europe*, 43 countries have not enacted laws on patients' rights. Nine countries, including Georgia, Greece, and Lithuania, have introduced laws.

UK children take too little exercise:

There has been a decline in children's activity levels in England and Wales over the past 10 years; among children aged 2 to 7 years, 33% of boys and 38% of girls are not meeting the recommended activity guidelines. In *Couch Kids: The Growing Epidemic*, the British Heart Foundation warns that the findings could result in more premature deaths from coronary heart disease in later life.

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Californian doctors' leaders sue health insurers

Fred Charatan *Florida*

The California Medical Association (CMA) has filed an anti-racketeering lawsuit against the state's three largest for-profit national health insurance companies. The CMA alleges that the health insurers Wellpoint/Blue Cross of California, HealthNet, and Pacificare have used coercive, unfair, and fraudulent means to dominate and control doctor-patient relationships for their own financial gain, to the detriment of patients and physicians alike.

The American Medical Association supports the action of the 30 000 strong CMA, which

alleges breaches of the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). The CMA's president, Marie Kuffner, hopes the lawsuit will be the last step in what has been an excruciating and lengthy effort to force the insurers' health plans to give physicians adequate resources to care for their patients.

"It is with sadness that we are forced to this last resort," said Dr Kuffner, a professor of anaesthesiology at the University of California in Los Angeles. "We, as physicians, have tried to work with the for-profit health maintenance organisations in the marketplace and have attempted to curb the abuses through the legislative process, all to no avail. We cannot continue to allow our patients' health to be jeopardised by corporate greed." She added: "For years these profit driven companies denied needed services, interfered with medical decisions, and valued dollars

more than lives. We say, 'No more in the state of California.'"

More than nine million Californians, nearly 43% of those covered by for-profit plans in the state, are insured by the defendant plans. "CMA's role as plaintiff shows how crucial the healthcare problem is in the nation, particularly in California, where 21 million people belong to a managed care plan of some kind," said Archie Lamb, a lawyer in Birmingham, Alabama, who filed the suit on the CMA's behalf. The lawsuit uses the civil provisions of the RICO act to contend that the CMA's members have been economically harmed through a pattern of misconduct. If successful, the CMA may win up to three times the amount of damages that it would in a traditional lawsuit.

The insurers reject the CMA's charges and said that the action would only raise costs to the healthcare providers involved. □

Mosquitoes prefer pregnant women

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Pregnant women are twice as attractive to malaria carrying mosquitoes as non-pregnant women, according to new research. This added attractiveness is thought to be linked to physiological and behavioural changes and places pregnant women at greater risk of malaria, an important cause of stillbirths, low birth weight, and early infant mortality.

For the research, 36 pregnant and 36 non-pregnant women were studied in the Gambia. Every night during the study, three women from each group slept alone under a bed net in six identical huts. The following morning the number of mosquitoes from each hut was counted to measure the relative attractiveness of each woman, and it was found that that twice as many mosquitoes had been attracted to the pregnant women.

The researchers, who report their findings in the *Lancet* (2000;355:1972), say that this increased attractiveness is likely to be linked to at least two physiological factors. Firstly, they found that women at an advanced stage

of pregnancy exhaled 21% greater volume than non-pregnant women. Mosquitoes are attracted to the moisture and carbon dioxide in exhaled breath.

Secondly, they observed that the abdomens of pregnant women were 0.7°C hotter. They suggest that the hotter, pregnant women released more volatile substances from their skin surface, allowing the mosquitoes to detect them more easily. The fact that the pregnant women left their tents during the night,

probably to urinate, twice as often as the non-pregnant group might also be important.

Dr Steve Lindsay of Durham University, one of the study's authors, said: "This study underlines the importance of protection, particularly for women in their first pregnancy. Simple measures can help, such as using bed nets treated with insecticide and checking for lurking mosquitoes inside the net."

He added: "Our next challenge is to develop strategies to reduce the mosquito attractiveness of pregnant women. We are already looking into the use of bactericidal soap to reduce the chemical signals produced by skin bacteria, which help mosquitoes find blood." □



Promoters dressed up as mosquitoes in a Shanghai shopping mall warn Chinese women about malaria