

# bmj.com news roundup

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## Rate of recall after breast cancer screening in the US is twice that in the UK

The proportion of women who are recalled for further testing after screening for breast cancer using mammography and the proportion of negative results after surgical biopsy are twice as high in the United States as in the United Kingdom, although the rate of detection of breast cancer is similar in the two countries.

Dr Rebecca Smith-Bindman, from the University of California, San Francisco, and colleagues compared the results of screening for breast cancer in the two countries. They looked at rates of recall (the percentage of mammograms that resulted in a recommendation for prompt additional testing, clinical evaluation, or percutaneous biopsy), open surgical biopsy, and cancer detection among women of a similar age (*JAMA* 2003;290:2129-37).

The study included women aged 50 years and over who had mammography between 1 January 1996 and 31 December 1999 in three large scale screening programmes. In all, 5.5 million mammograms were undertaken in the programmes.

Recall rates were about twice as high in the United States as in the United Kingdom for all age groups, even though rates of detection of cancer were similar in the two countries.

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

## Smallpox bioterrorism conference highlights divisions over vaccines

Several international experts who met in Geneva this week warned that a bioterrorist attack using smallpox was not only possible but probable. They urged governments to prepare themselves before it was too late.

But their message was somewhat undermined by the fact



## Charities say southern Sudan faces a health crisis and record malnutrition

As hopes of an end to the 20 year civil war in Sudan were raised by new talks taking place in Kenya this week, charities reported that the health situation in the south was deteriorating.

As Dr John Garang, leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (above left) met Ali Osman Mohamed Taha, vice-president of Sudan (above right), diplomats and analysts said the prospects for peace have never been better. But observers from charities and non-governmental organisations said that the country was facing a whooping cough outbreak, many cases of preventable blindness, and record malnutrition.

An estimated 175 children have died of whooping cough during a recent outbreak in southern Sudan. Almost 1000 suspected cases have been seen so far, a spokesman for the charity Tearfund said last week.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization has put out a statement about the continuing risk of blindness. Extremely poor levels of hygiene, coupled with a lack of healthcare facilities, drugs, and trained personnel, were contributing to "widespread preventable blindness," a spokesman said. Unicef has also pointed out that every survey undertaken in Bahr el Ghazal and the Upper Nile since the beginning of the year has shown malnutrition rates of at least 20%.

Peter Moszynski *Natinga, Sudan*

that the conference, entitled "Smallpox BioSecurity," was initiated and financed by Acambis, a US company that manufactures vaccine.

The conference was also being held only a week after US federal health officials proclaimed that the US smallpox vaccination programme was over. "The fact is, it's ceased," Ray Strikas of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), told *USA Today* (16 October, p A 01). The pace of new vaccinations had dropped dramatically in April after well publicised reports of unexpected heart problems, he said.

The two day conference on the smallpox threat, which began in Geneva on 21 October, looked certain to highlight divisions

among scientists and public health experts on the risk of a smallpox bioterrorist attack.

One of the speakers at the conference, Ken Alibek, a professor at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, and president of Hadron Advanced Biosystems, said he wanted the conference to show that despite eradication in 1979, smallpox was still a serious threat.

"We need to define possible directions and talk about vaccines and epidemiological measures," Mr Alibek said on Monday.

But David Heymann, a WHO infectious diseases expert who was also due to speak at the conference, said that WHO recommended mass vaccination only in the event of an outbreak

and that this was justified because the vaccine provided protection if given up to four days after exposure.

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

## Tobacco companies start price war in Poland to offset tax rises

The tobacco industry this week responded to the Polish government's attempts to raise taxes on cigarettes by slashing prices. Poland, like other countries joining the European Union, is required to increase its tobacco taxes to bring them into line with those of the EU.

In response to the tax hikes Gallaher and British American Tobacco introduced new cheap brands and Philip Morris dropped the price of its most popular cheap brand by 15%. Reemtsma, now owned by Imperial, is likely to follow, leaving other companies that cannot afford price reductions in an unenviable position.

The industry had already lobbied successfully for long delays to the deadline for these tax increases, and its latest move indicates how it is likely to respond to tax increases throughout the countries joining the EU.

Anna Gilmore *London*

## NHS cervical screening programme to introduce liquid based cytology

The NHS cervical screening programme in England and Wales is switching to liquid based cytology to minimise the number of smear tests that are unsuitable for testing. It is also going to change the frequency of screening to intervals based on age, it was announced this week.

The change followed pilot studies of liquid based cytology showing that it was associated with fewer "inadequate" cervical

smear tests, so reducing the number of women recalled for repeat testing.

The current screening programme, which uses the Pap smear test, requires a sample of cells to be collected from the cervix with a disposable spatula. The sample is spread on to a glass slide and sprayed with, or dipped in, a liquid to fix it before being sent for examination.

In contrast, the spatula device used to collect cervical cell samples in liquid based cytology techniques is simply rinsed or broken off into a vial of preservative fluid, with minimal risk of sample loss. The sample is then sent to the hospital laboratory, where the slide is prepared.

The NHS cancer screening programme also announced that the frequency of cervical screening is being changed from the current interval of every three to five years for women aged 20-64 years. Women will be invited for a first test at the age of 25 years and will be offered screening every three years until the age of 50. Cervical screening will then be offered every five years for women aged 50-64 years.

Susan Mayor *London*

## German doctors shun eastern states

Eastern Germany faces a dramatic shortage of doctors. In the past few years several hundred general and specialist practices in the five eastern states of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt, and Saxony had to be closed down because vacancies could not be filled. However, with an increasing proportion of elderly people in the eastern states, medical care is in high demand.

The situation will worsen in the future, because the percentage of young doctors in Germany as a whole is decreasing: only 19% of doctors are younger than 35.

Young doctors educated at the medical schools in east Germany, such as Leipzig and Dresden, are leaving for more lucrative jobs in the western part of the country, which is also having difficulty filling vacancies. Furthermore, more

and more doctors are emigrating and are prepared to accept more attractive offers from Sweden, Norway, and Great Britain.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

## Regulatory body will inquire into decision to test patient for HIV without consent

A high court in South Africa is to force the Health Professions Council, the statutory body that registers doctors and regulates their professional affairs, to hold a hearing into the conduct of a doctor who failed to disclose the HIV status of a patient he had tested without her permission.

The decision stemmed from the council's refusal to hold an inquiry after it made a decision that was based only on the doctor's evidence.

The case arose after the patient, known only as VRM, had a stillborn baby apparently as a result of her HIV infection, a condition she had not known she had.

The doctor, Elardus Labuschagne, had treated the woman in her sixth month of pregnancy. He had tested her for HIV but had decided not to communicate the positive result to her, as he felt it would burden her unnecessarily.

However, when the baby was stillborn he told her that it had probably died as a result of her HIV infection. That was the first she had heard of her condition.

The AIDS Law Project at Wits University took her case to the Health Professions Council, which held a "preliminary" inquiry into the circumstances, heard only the doctor's evidence, and declined to investigate further at a full disciplinary hearing.

A high court ruling upheld this decision on review (as it was in the patient's best interests, the court believed)—but the decision was then appealed to a full bench of the Pretoria High Court, where it succeeded last week.

Pat Sidley *Johannesburg*

## Governor Jeb Bush intervenes in "right to die" case

Fred Charatan *Florida*

A right to die case in Florida that has passed through the hands of 19 separate judges drew the state's governor, Jeb Bush, into its ambit last week, when he met the family of the woman at its centre and filed a brief with the court.

The case centres on Terri Schiavo, 39, who has been in a persistent vegetative state since a cardiac arrest in 1990. Her husband, Michael Schiavo, won a judgment in November 2002 that his wife's feeding tube could be removed. He has said that his wife once told him that she would never want to be kept alive artificially. But Mrs Schiavo's parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, have been fighting for her feeding tube to remain.

Last week Mrs Schiavo's husband prevailed. After a court judgment on Tuesday 16 October doctors removed the feeding tube. She is expected to die some time in the next fortnight.

Governor Jeb Bush's brief does not yet seem to have had any effect. In his brief, known as an "amicus curiae" brief (a brief provided by a disinterested adviser to the court), he argued that it might be unconstitutional to allow Ms Schiavo to die without testing her to see whether she can swallow, a test she has already failed.

Besides filing the brief he has instructed his legal staff to find out whether there is a way that the judge's original 2002 order to remove the feeding tube could be found to be unconstitutional.

But last Friday both the circuit court judge and the First District Court of Appeals in Tallahassee, Florida, denied the parents' request for restoration of the feeding tube, without comment.

Most doctors, including those appointed by the courts, deem Mrs Schiavo's condition to be permanent and irreversible.

Pressure had been brought to bear on Governor Bush by a number of pro-life organisations and committed individuals. Pamela Hennessey of Clearwater, Florida, for example, collected 40,000 signatures on an online petition asking Bush to intervene.

Diana Coleman, president of an organisation called Not Dead Yet, based in Forest Park, Illinois, which opposes the right to die movement, said, "This case threatens all people who are deemed incompetent, whether it's due to dementia, Alzheimer's, brain injury, or mental retardation." She added: "What disabled people are seeing is [that] the courts will not protect us and the healthcare system will not honour our rights."

The case has been complicated by claims from the Schindlers that shortly before her cardiac arrest their daughter had said she wanted a divorce and by counterclaims from Michael Schiavo that the Schindlers want custody of their daughter, so that they can get some of the malpractice award that he won in 1992. The award totalled \$1m (£0.6m; €0.9m). □



Governor Jeb Bush addresses reporters after a meeting with Terri Schiavo's parents, Mary and Bob Schindler (centre and centre right)