

Australian drug pricing scheme under pressure in free trade talks

Political parties and consumer groups in the United States and Australia have warned that a free trade agreement between the two countries will result in increased costs for prescription drugs in Australia.

Lobbying by the US drug industry has persuaded the US Trade Representative, Robert Zoellick, to propose changes to the Australian government's Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) to ensure higher prices for drugs under patent.

Under the current scheme, the Australian government subsidises approved drugs and negotiates heavily discounted prices from the manufacturer. Patients are able to obtain the drugs far more cheaply than they otherwise would.

In a December 2003 report on foreign trade barriers, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), the US drug industry association, complained that mandatory cost effectiveness analysis before a drug is listed on the scheme is part of a "draconian regulatory and budgetary cost control" scheme.

The coordinator of the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network, Dr Patricia Ranald, fears Australian government negotiators will agree to weaken key provisions of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme in return for increased access to the lucrative US agricultural market.

Bob Burton *Canberra*

GPs reluctant to cover out of hours work, survey shows

Just half of GPs will work out of hours under new contracts, according to a survey questioning more than 1000 doctors, published in *Pulse* magazine.

The new contracts are designed to halt the recruitment crisis in general practice and benefit the lives of family doctors.

Under the new contracts, GPs will be able to hand over liability for out of hours care to primary care trusts. Doctors who do so will forfeit £6000 (\$10 880; €8730) a year from their earnings, with the cash going to trusts to spend on locums and cover staff.

Nadeeja Korralage *BMJ*

Doctor proposes alternative to female genital mutilation

The proposal of a "harmless and symbolic" alternative to female genital mutilation, to be practised on African women at a public hospital in Florence, has sparked strong reactions in Italy.

The alternative "ritual," consisting of a puncture of the clitoris under local anaesthesia that would let a few drops of blood out, has been proposed by Omar Abdulcadir, a Somali gynaecologist who heads the centre for the prevention and therapy of female genital mutilations at the Careggi Hospital, Florence.

"We strongly oppose female genital mutilation, and we hope the practice will disappear all over the world," said Dr Abdulcadir. But many women were strongly committed to the custom. "We consulted with the women attending our meetings and with the leaders of 10 local communities of immigrants from Africa, who have a strong influence, and they agreed this could be a last resort option for the women who [were not prepared] to abandon the practice."

Opposition to his plan has come from Aidos, a non-governmental organisation based in Rome, working with women in the developing world. "Safeguarding the symbolic value of a ritual whose scope is the control of female sexuality by males would mean legitimising the cultural belief system behind it, making it more difficult to eradicate female genital mutilation," objected Cristiana Scoppa, director of communication for Aidos.

Dr Abdulcadir's proposal is being evaluated by Tuscany's regional bioethics committee.

Fabio Turone *Milan*

More evidence that folic acid reduces risk of ischaemic stroke

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Men who consume relatively large amounts of folic acid have a significantly reduced risk of developing ischaemic stroke, concludes a newly reported study.

The study's lead author, Dr Ka He of Northwestern University in Illinois, and colleagues investigated a total of 725 incident strokes—455 ischaemic, 125 haemorrhagic, and 145 unknown types of stroke—that were documented during 14 years of follow up between 1986 and 2000.

The participants were part of the health professional follow up study, which was established in 1986 when 51 529 male US health professionals aged 40-75 answered a detailed questionnaire on medical history, lifestyle, and diet. Participants were mailed questionnaires in every other year to update information on potential risk factors and identify new cases of diseases (*Stroke* 2004;35:169-74).

End points were all incident fatal and non-fatal strokes occurring between the return of the 1986 questionnaire and the end of follow up on 31 January 2000. A physician, blinded to risk factor status, reviewed participants' medical records if they reported an incident stroke in any of the follow up questionnaires. Most cases were diagnosed with neuroimaging, and fatal cases were identified by next of kin, colleagues, postal authorities, or by a search of the National Death Index and confirmed by medical records.

After adjustment for major lifestyle and dietary factors, high intake of folate was associated with a significantly lower risk of ischaemic but not haemorrhagic stroke. The multivariate relative risk of ischaemic stroke was 0.71 (95% confidence interval 0.52 to 0.96; P for trend=0.05) for the 20% men with the highest intake compared with the 20% with the lowest intake. Intake of vitamin B-12 was also inversely associated with risk of ischaemic stroke.

Dr Ka He said that this was not the first report to show that folic acid can reduce the risk of stroke. All told, the results seem conclusive and consistent enough to suggest that men should change their behaviour to protect their health. "I believe we should recommend men to increase their intake of folate to reduce stroke risk," he said.

Folic acid is a B vitamin that is naturally found in fruits and vegetables. Recently, the US government ruled that manufacturers should fortify grain products with folic acid, adding it to flour, rice, pasta, and cornmeal.

Research has shown that extra amounts of folic acid help reduce levels of homocysteine, and some studies have associated lower homocysteine levels with a decreased risk of stroke (*New England Journal of Medicine* 1995; 332:286-91). Increased levels of homocysteine are thought to weaken the walls of the arteries (*Stroke* 1994;25:1924-30). □



Researchers from Illinois say that men should increase their intake of folate, which is found in green vegetables such as spinach, to reduce their risk of stroke