

bmj.com news roundup

Full versions of these stories are available at: bmj.com/content/vol327/issue7406/#NEWS_ROUNDUP

UK introduces measures to reduce errors with methotrexate

The United Kingdom is introducing practical measures to reduce the risk of errors with oral methotrexate, in response to deaths and serious events in patients taking the drug incorrectly.

The National Patient Safety Agency, an organisation that monitors adverse events occurring in NHS funded care and makes recommendations to reduce risk, identified reports of 25 deaths and 26 cases of serious harm associated with the use of oral methotrexate in patients living in the community in England over the past decade.

A range of factors had contributed to these adverse events, including patients not being given sufficient information on how often to take the drug—once weekly and not once daily—lack of clear packaging, and variations in patient monitoring.

To overcome these potential causes of error, the agency has suggested, among other things, introducing a treatment diary for patients to keep to help monitor their methotrexate treatment, and new packaging and patient information.

Susan Mayor *London*

Vitamin supplements do not reduce incidence of cancer or heart disease

The evidence that vitamin supplements are useful in preventing cancer or heart disease is not conclusive, the US Preventive Services Task Force, an influential US government advisory panel, has said.

Moreover, β carotene supplementation may do more harm than good in patients with lung cancer, the panel found (*Annals of Internal Medicine* 2003;139:51-5).

A separate meta-analysis



Hospitals must use London's appeal to tackle workforce shortages

The NHS in London must exploit the capital's reputation as a dynamic, culturally diverse city (exemplified by Tate Britain, above), as well as being a leader in healthcare training, if it is to tackle shortages in its workforce, says a report published this week by the King's Fund. High staff turnover, the heavy use of temporary staff, and a high level of recruitment from overseas are all characteristics of the capital's healthcare workforce.

The report suggests that by using a marketing campaign to counter the view that living in London is a predominantly negative experience and by helping to overcome some of London's problems (particularly housing), employers in London could achieve a labour market with a competitive edge.

It includes a number of case studies that exemplify good practices in human resources management. For example, University College London Hospitals NHS Trust was praised for its successful campaign to recruit nurses from the Philippines. By offering the nurses an initial two year contract, accommodation, and help in integrating into the London community, the trust achieved a high rate of retention.

In Capital Health? Creative Solutions to London's NHS Workforce Challenges is accessible at www.kingsfund.org.uk
Debashis Singh *London*

reported by researchers at Oregon Health and Science University who are affiliated with the Preventive Services Task Force also found no evidence that vitamins are useful in preventing cardiovascular disease (*Annals of Internal Medicine* 2003;139:56-70).

In reaching these findings the task force researchers searched medical reports from 1966 to September 2001, using the Cochrane controlled trials register and Medline, looking at randomised control trials and other studies.

The literature review failed to find any good quality studies that showed any beneficial effect of taking vitamins A or C on 68 cardiovascular health or in reducing the risk of cancer.

Deborah Josefson *Nebraska*

WHO: outbreak of SARS is over, but fight should go on

The World Health Organization said on 5 July that the global outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) had been contained, but it urged health authorities across the world not to be complacent, because the world was not yet free of the disease.

WHO removed Taiwan, where the last SARS case was detected and the patient isolated on 15 June, from a list of areas of recent transmission that travellers are advised to avoid.

WHO officials said the patient in Taiwan had passed

two consecutive incubation periods of 10 days without passing on the disease. Since then no new cases have been reported.

However, they warned that in the absence of a vaccine and a cure the possibility of seasonal recurrence of SARS could not be ruled out. It remains unclear whether patients without symptoms can infect other people, and scientists are still working on a diagnostic test to detect cases in the early stages. Without such a test the next flu season could trigger panic again.

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

More frequent screening would improve detection of colon cancer

Examining the colon more frequently than is currently recommended may improve detection and prevention of cancer, according to the preliminary results of a large study. At present, US patients are advised to have a flexible sigmoidoscopy examination at the age of 50, and every five years after that.

The prostate, lung, colorectal, and ovarian cancer screening trial is a randomised controlled, community based study that is evaluating the effect of cancer screening on mortality from site specific cancers.

Between 1993 and 2001 the trial enrolled more than 154 000 people aged 55 to 74 years to evaluate different types of screening for cancer of the colon. The preliminary report gives the findings on patients who underwent flexible sigmoidoscopy at baseline and at three years (*JAMA* 2003;290:41-8).

About 11 500 patients who had flexible sigmoidoscopy and were found to be free of polyps and cancer were told to come back in three years' time for another examination. Eighty per cent of the patients, or 9317, returned. Of these, 1292 (14%) had abnormal growths, and 292 were found to have cancer. The total incidence of adenoma or cancer in the distal colon three years after a negative result of flexible sigmoidoscopy was 3.1%.
Scott Gottlieb *New York*