

bmj.com news roundup

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Medicines Control Agency slated by Commons committee

The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts report *Safety, Quality, Efficacy: Regulating Medicines in the UK* criticises the former Medicines Control Agency for its “lack of dynamism” in improving public health and for its “non-existent” public profile, which made it difficult for it to function as a provider of safety information.

The committee looked at the Medicines Control Agency’s performance against its key objectives of promoting and safeguarding public health through the regulation and provision of information on medicines, and its service to stakeholders.

The report was critical of the poor quality of information leaflets and labels, designed to alert patients and doctors to potential risks of medication, and the low level of reporting of adverse reactions to medicines by doctors. These were cited as evidence of the lack of dynamism to drive further improvements in the protection of public health.

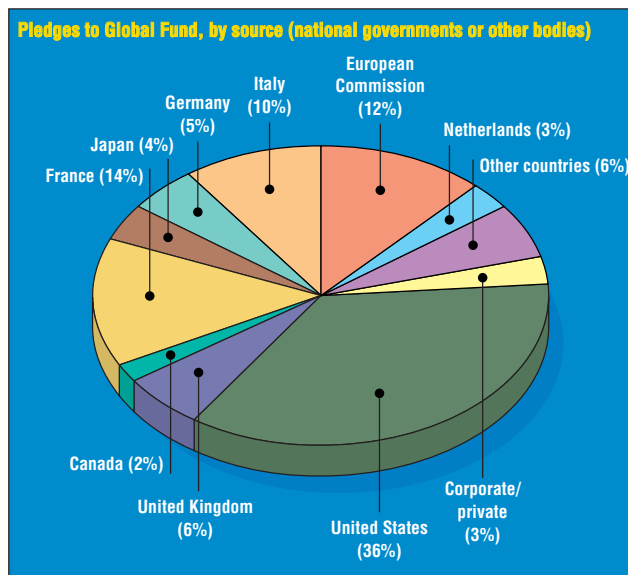
Debashis Singh *London*

Safety, Quality, Efficacy: Regulating Medicines in the UK (26th report of session 2002-3) is available at www.parliament.uk/

Group to review babies’ deaths

England’s attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, last week announced that he would be setting up a high level group to review the deaths of babies that involved Dr Alan Williams, a forensic pathologist who gave evidence for the prosecution in the case of Sally Clark, who was convicted but cleared after a second appeal of killing her two baby sons (8 February, p 304).

Dr Williams failed to disclose results from microbiology tests on Mrs Clark’s second son, Harry. The group, which will include representatives from the Crown



UN report predicts shortfall in AIDS funding in developing countries

Funding for the prevention and treatment of AIDS in low and middle income countries is only about half what is needed to provide basic services, warned a report published by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) last week.

The *Report on the State of HIV/AIDS Financing* estimated that \$4.7bn (£2.8bn; €4.1bn) should be available to spend on the AIDS epidemic in developing countries in 2003. More than \$10.5bn a year would be needed by 2005 for a “barebones” package of prevention, treatment, care, and support programmes.

By 2007, almost \$15bn would be needed, the report predicted, adding that this level of funding “would need to be maintained for at least a decade to successfully combat AIDS.” The analysis showed that almost two thirds of the funding comes from 12 national governments and other bodies.

Susan Mayor *London*

Prosecution Service, police, and Home Office, will identify cases where the defendant was convicted after important evidence by Dr Williams. An in depth review will be carried out into these cases.

Guidance has been sent to all chief crown prosecutors asking them to identify all cases, current and future, in which either Dr Williams or the retired consultant paediatrician Professor Roy Meadow were or are witnesses. Prosecutors have been told to send to defence lawyers in current or future cases in which either man is a witness a copy of the appeal court judgment in the Clark case. They have also been told to draw their attention to sections of the judgment criticising the evidence of the two experts.

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Doctors fear that rise in infection rates points to a return to unsafe sex

Numbers of cases of sexually transmitted infection in the Netherlands have increased by two thirds in three years, leaving researchers “alarmed” because it points to an increase in unsafe sex. The total figure for all sexually transmitted infections rose over three years from about 5500 to 9500.

The researchers’ report highlights worrying evidence of people becoming infected both with HIV and other diseases, in particular syphilis, so allowing HIV to be transmitted more easily.

Although the incidence of syphilis is rising in other European countries, the Dutch data show a sharp rise of 78% in 12 months—including a “remarkable” rise of 182% among gay and bisexual men. Meanwhile, the number of new cases of HIV more than doubled, with gay and bisexual men accounting for more than half.

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

Registration of STI and HIV Consultation at Regional Community Health Services in the Netherlands: Annual Report 2002 is at www.rivm.nl/en

Unsafe sexual practices are common, say US studies

Unsafe sexual practices are common in people infected with HIV and in those at high risk of infection, warned two US epidemiological studies published this week in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

More than half (55%) of the men taking part in a survey of sexual behaviour reported having unprotected, insertive anal sex over the previous six months, and 48% had engaged in unprotected, receptive anal sex. A similar number, 45%, of the men had unprotected oral intercourse (*American Journal of Public Health* 2003;93:926-32).

A second US study showed that 42% of gay or bisexual men, 19% of heterosexual men, and 17% of women reported having sex without disclosing their HIV positive status to their sexual partners. Non-disclosure of HIV status was more common in casual encounters and in non-exclusive partnerships (*American Journal of Public Health* 2003; 93:949-54).

Deborah Josefson *Nebraska*

Health effects of chemicals need closer scrutiny

Radical reforms in the use and assessment of chemicals have been proposed in a report published in the United Kingdom last