

rates, as long as doing so "does not undermine the ability of other providers in the local health economy to meet their NHS obligations."

The plans have met widespread opposition from NHS staff and MPs alike, with 60 Labour MPs voting against the government on the plans last week.

The applications for foundation trust status must be submitted by the autumn, and the successful hospitals (subject to parliament passing the Health and Social Care Bill) will be granted trust status in April 2004.

All 29 trusts are "three star" (top rated) hospitals.

Anne Gulland *London*

Patient confidentiality challenged over HIV test results

An Australian Supreme Court judge is considering a case that challenges the legal protection of patient confidentiality after two GPs failed to inform a woman that her African fiancé was HIV positive after the couple attended a surgery together for blood tests.

The 28 year old woman, who went on to contract the disease, is suing the doctors in the New South Wales court for negligence and breach of contract for not taking adequate steps to protect her interests.

The woman, known as "PD" in court, was concerned about the high rate of HIV in the man's home country of Ghana, but he failed to tell her about his positive test and forged a pathology report to convince her to have unprotected sex.

She is seeking damages for pain and suffering, financial loss, care for her children, and medical expenses. The hearing was told she might live for 19 years with treatment but could die in seven years if she didn't take medication.

The GPs, Drs Nicholas Harvey and King Weng Chen, claim they told the man to inform his partner (PD) and could not have foreseen he would be so irresponsible. The defence also argued they were bound by con-

fidentiality not to contact her.

PD attended a joint consultation in 1998 with her partner (now ex-husband) at the Alpha Medical Centre in the suburbs of Sydney to check with Dr Harvey if they were free of sexually transmitted diseases before getting married.

PD's results were negative, but Dr Chen informed the man that he was positive for HIV and hepatitis B. Under cross examination Dr Harvey said that giving the man information about AIDS and the importance of going to the clinic discharged his professional obligations to the couple. The judgment will be announced at a later date.

Christopher Zinn *Sydney*

Media misled the public over the MMR vaccine

Most people wrongly believed that doctors and scientists are equally divided over the safety of the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine, according to new research carried out during the high profile public debate over the vaccine last year.

At the height of the media coverage the impression was created that medical scientists were split down the middle over the vaccine's safety, including reports of links with autism, say the study's authors, from Cardiff University.

Less than one in four people were aware that the bulk of the evidence favoured the vaccine, say the authors of the study. "Although almost all scientific experts rejected the claim of a link between MMR and autism, 53% of those [the people] surveyed at the height of the media coverage of the issues assumed that because both sides of the debate received equal media coverage, there must be equal evidence for each. Only 23% of the population were aware that the bulk of evidence favoured supporters of the vaccine," says the study.

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Towards a Better Map: Science, the Public and the Media is available at the Economic and Social Research Council's website (www.esrc.ac.uk)

Poor security is biggest impediment to health care in Iraq

Owen Dyer *London*

Poor security was identified as the most serious impediment to the delivery of aid and health care in Baghdad at a meeting of the Red Cross and Red Crescent last week. "The three most urgent problems for health in Iraq today are security, security, and security," said Dr Ghulam Popal, the World Health Organization's representative in Baghdad.

Several hospitals have been offered "protection" by armed gangs. Oxfam's media officer in Baghdad, Alex Renton, said one survey had found that more than half of 56 hospitals have been taken over by militias that take their orders from local mosques. Posters on hospital walls warn female staff to wear the hejab.

The lack of security was vividly illustrated by the murder in his home last week of the neurosurgeon Dr Jaafar Al-Nakeeb. Dr Al-Nakeeb, who was a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Glasgow, was shot in his garden by an armed gang. His wife, Faiza, was also shot but escaped over a fence.

Dr Al-Nakeeb, who worked during the 1970s in Preston, England, was one of only six highly qualified neurosurgeons in Iraq.

Iraq's medical profession did, however, flex its political muscles successfully for the first time last week. Doctors' protests forced US administrators to remove the newly appointed health minister, Dr Ali Shnan al-Janabi, formerly a senior Ba'ath party member.

Meanwhile, in the British held city of Basra, an outbreak of cholera, which had been long

predicted by aid agencies in southern Iraq, has been confirmed. The national public health laboratory in Kuwait has confirmed four cases from stool samples. Another 18 cases have been clinically confirmed by three hospitals in Basra.

WHO has set up a task force in conjunction with local doctors to monitor and contain the epidemic but says that its work has been hampered by the looting of the city's central laboratory, requiring samples to be sent to Kuwait for analysis.

Basra has seen cholera, which typically peaks in the summer months, every year since 1989. The number of cases confirmed so far is not out of line with previous years, but aid agencies and local doctors believe they represent the tip of an iceberg.

The city's water treatment facilities were largely destroyed in the war and by the subsequent looting, although WHO says it has helped to restore the water supply almost to prewar levels. Although the water is chlorinated before pumping, tests at several outlets have shown that adequate chlorination is not reaching the whole system.

WHO representatives also believe that the supply has been contaminated at several points by people tapping water illegally. Farmers have been shooting holes into an aqueduct that feeds the city.

Unicef is delivering water daily to Basra, but private operators are also selling water of unregulated quality. □



A young man takes water from a broken water pipe in Basra