



India's burden of waterborne diseases is underestimated

Ganapati Mudur New Delhi

Major efforts to improve access to drinking water across India have not been matched by proportionate declines in deaths and illnesses from waterborne diseases, which remain grossly underestimated, a new government report has said.

Today 85% of India's population is covered by water infrastructure, said the report, from India's planning commission, a top policy making body. Between 400 000 and 500 000 children aged under five years die each year from diarrhoea, the report said, citing a failure to improve personal and home hygiene as a factor.

The report also cautioned that leading public health authorities record only a small fraction of cases of waterborne diseases. Reported data indicate that the incidence of viral hepatitis is 12 cases per 100 000 people. But at least two studies in urban communities studies have shown that the incidence might be around 100 per 100 000.

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Coroners will deliver fuller verdicts after inquests

Clare Dyer
legal correspondent, BMJ

Bereaved people will have greater rights to participate in inquests, and coroners will deliver fuller verdicts emphasising the failures that contributed to deaths, under a package of reforms proposed for the 800 year old coroners system in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

The two year independent review, which was commissioned by the Home Office, also recommends a much tighter system of certifying deaths to prevent a recurrence of the Harold Shipman affair, in which the Greater Manchester GP murdered 215 patients over 23 years.

Under the changes, all existing coroners would have to reapply for their jobs.

At present most coroners are solicitors (some combining the coroner's job with legal practice), and a few are doctors. The review recommends that all coroners should work full time and have at least five years' practice as a solicitor or barrister. Doctor coroners would be phased out, although those now in office would be able to reapply, with their experience as coroners replacing time in legal practice.

Each coroner will work with a doctor as a statutory medical assessor. The doctor will supervise and audit the death certification process, handle cases needing medical investigation, and create links between the coroner's office and public health and safety networks.

EU health ministers reject proposal for limited direct to consumer advertising

Rory Watson Brussels

Moves to allow drug manufacturers to advertise directly to particular groups of patients have been rejected by European Union health ministers.

The European Commission had proposed relaxing the current ban on direct advertising of prescription drugs almost two years ago as part of a wide ranging reform of existing legislation on drugs. The pilot scheme would have applied solely to patients with three chronic diseases: AIDS, diabetes, and asthma. The drug information that the companies

wanted to offer—on websites or in specialised publications—would have had to have been authorised by national authorities.

Despite the planned safeguards, consumer groups argued that it was not the role of drug companies to provide information to patients. They argued that this was a task for national authorities and the London based European Medicines Evaluation Agency (EMA), which use data from independent sources. The European parliament and, last week, EU member governments agreed and rejected the proposal.

New Zealand GPs call for end to direct to consumer advertising

Zosia Kmietowicz London

GPs in New Zealand are petitioning the health minister to ban the advertising of prescription drugs to patients. New Zealand is one of only two countries that allow drug companies to advertise directly to the public; the other is the United States.

But GPs in New Zealand say that such advertising causes many problems that are bad for doctors, the economy, and patients. They have estimated that it cost the country \$NZ2.7m (£0.94m; \$1.56m; €1.3m) between April 2002 and January 2003 to switch people

to a new asthma inhaler after it was widely advertised on television. The switch was not necessarily right for all patients, say the GPs. But because patients had seen it advertised they were determined to have it.

"GPs are particularly upset by the misleading content of many of the advertisements and the commercial pressure this puts them under to prescribe advertised drugs, even when they're no better than existing alternatives or are not suitable for the patient," said Professor Les Toop, from the Christchurch School of Medicine, who heads the campaign for a ban.