

UK doctors warned after ricin poison found in police raid

Doctors in the United Kingdom have been alerted to the symptoms of ricin poisoning after a small amount was found last week when police raided a flat in north London.

The Department of Health alerted the health service on the symptoms of ricin poisoning after police found castor oil beans, from which ricin is extracted, and equipment for crushing the beans at the raided flat. Scientists at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratories at Porton Down in Wiltshire identified a small quantity of material found in the flat as ricin.

In a statement sent immediately to all GPs, hospitals, and public health services, the deputy chief medical officer, Dr Pat Troop, said: "The department is now alerting the health service, including primary care, about these developments. It is also ensuring that the health service is able to provide advice to the public, including through NHS Direct... While our message is still alert not alarm, we would reiterate our earlier appeals for the public to remain vigilant and aware and report anything suspicious to police."

Susan Mayor *London*

Detailed information on ricin is available at www.phls.org.uk

FDA insists oestrogen products for menopause carry a warning

The Food and Drug Administration has announced that manufacturers of drugs that contain either oestrogen alone or both oestrogen and progestogen together for the treatment of symptoms associated with menopause must include a new warning on the labels. The warning must state that the drugs may increase the risk of heart attacks, strokes, blood clots, and breast cancer.



Is painting earliest portrayal of Down's syndrome?

Psychiatrists have identified what is believed to be one of the earliest paintings of someone with Down's syndrome.

The 1515 Flemish painting (detail above), by an unknown artist, considerably predates John Langdon Down's first description of the condition in 1866. It shows an angel (next to Mary) and possibly one other figure, the shepherd in the centre of the background—with the syndrome.

"If our diagnosis is correct, this implies that Down's syndrome is not a modern disease," say the psychiatrists (*American Journal of Medical Genetics* 2003;116:399-405).

The diagnosis of Down's syndrome in the angel was based on a number of features: a flattened mid-face, epicanthal folds, upslanted palpebral fissures, a small and upturned tip of the nose, and downward curving of the corners of the mouth. The hands, crossed over the breast, have short fingers, especially on the left.

The painting, *The Adoration of the Christ Child*, which is in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, may also be evidence of an approach to people with a minor mental disorder that differs from the situation today. Because the physical signs of Down's syndrome were not then recognised as a predictor of disability, people with the syndrome may not have been treated by society on the basis of appearance.

The authors write: "It is possible that those with milder degrees of mental handicap were not recognised as having what we now call mental retardation; individuals who were perceived as being slightly slow, in contrast to those with severe handicaps, might have been fully integrated into society."

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

The announcement comes six months after a women's health initiative trial, sponsored by the US government, was halted three years earlier than expected (*BMJ* 2002;325:61).

The large landmark study found that women taking the hormone replacement product Prempro, a combination of oestrogen and progestogen, had a slightly higher risk of heart disease, breast cancer, stroke, and blood clots than women not taking the treatment.

The FDA said that because

the study concluded that the oral oestrogen increased these risks, it must be assumed that all other products containing oestrogen, including oestrogen patches, creams, and pills, could have similar effects, unless proved otherwise. Until now it was only Prempro's label that mentioned the risks, which are stated in boldface type. FDA commissioner Dr Mark McClellan said: "There is no reason to believe that any other drug is safer than Prempro."

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Israel considers paying people for donating a kidney

The severe shortage of kidneys for transplantation has induced Israel's health ministry to make a 180 degree turn in its policy and prepare a bill allowing compensation to be paid to people who donate a kidney for transplantation.

Averse to the idea of organ "selling," the ministry's legal experts stipulated that the compensation—whose amount has not yet been set—would be considered reimbursement to donors for their time, inconvenience, discomfort, and recovery.

If the bill is passed by the 16th Knesset (parliament), due to be elected on 28 January, it would be the first of its kind in the world, said ministry legal adviser Mira Huebner.

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich *Jerusalem*

India sets up a commission on macroeconomics and health

India has announced the formation of its own national commission on macroeconomics and health. The commission, to be co-chaired by India's health and finance ministers, will look into areas needing attention and try to find ways of increasing investment in health.

Its formation was prompted by the report of the World Health Organization's Commission on Macroeconomics and Health, which called for both increased budgetary allocations by the developing world and greater donor assistance (*BMJ* 2002;324:7).

"India is spending less than 1% of its gross national product on its healthcare budget and can never achieve the 8% economic growth that it aspires to without a significant increase in its budget for health, nutrition, and education," said Jeffrey Sachs, chairman of the WHO's commission, who is to be an adviser to India's national commission.

Sanjay Kumar *New Delhi*