

bmj.com news roundup

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Elderly need better coordinated services to keep them independent

Older people want better coordinated public services that will help them stay independent as long as possible. But this can be achieved only if different agencies work together and involve older people, says a report from the government's spending watchdog, the Audit Commission.

The commission cites research from the Local Government Centre at Warwick University (*Making a Difference—Better Government for Older People*), published in 2000, which showed the type of help that people wanted as they got older. But older people are too often getting a disjointed response when they need help or advice, says the Audit Commission in its report.

Agencies need to develop a "whole system" approach—one built around the needs of older people—it says. The agencies need to share the same vision, objectives, action, resources, and risk and recognise that the action of one part of the system has an impact elsewhere in the system. Service users should not be aware of the boundaries between the different organisations.

Lynn Eaton *London*

Integrated Services for Older People: Building a Whole System Approach in England is available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Australian government bails out medical indemnity funds

The Australian medical profession has had mixed reactions to the federal government's reform package to safeguard medical indemnity insurance, which it has unveiled after months of negotiation.

The rescue strategy, which will cost taxpayers \$A45m (£16m; \$25m; €26m) a year, will see taxpayers subsidise the insur-



Charity calls for ban on cluster bombs

Landmine Action—a UK umbrella group of concerned organisations—is calling for the concerted clearance of "explosive remnants of war" and a moratorium on cluster bombs until a new international humanitarian law is in place.

The move comes as part of landmine action week, 4-10 November. Unexploded cluster bombs are similar to landmines, which cause injuries, such as those suffered by the woman pictured above from southern Sudan. "As there is no way of distinguishing between soldiers and civilians, their use is indiscriminate, and that is in clear breach of international law," says the group.

The United States dropped 600 cluster bombs on Afghanistan in its initial bombing campaign, according to research by the charity Human Rights Watch. Each CBU 87B, the advanced type of cluster bomb used in Afghanistan, contains 202 "bomblets." The charity's executive director, Kenneth Roth, says a fifth of these bomblets failed to detonate on impact—resulting in tens of thousands of unexploded devices being strewn across a country that was already devastated by landmines.

The yellow bomblets resembled the yellow food packages the US air force was dropping. The Afghan Campaign to Ban Landmines reports cases of children being killed after rushing to pick up submunitions that they had mistaken for aid.

Peter Moszynski *London*

For more information see www.landmineaction.org

ance premiums for doctors in specialties that carry a high risk, such as obstetricians, neurosurgeons, and GPs who perform minor surgery.

The government will also pay half the cost of medical negligence awards of more than \$A2m and will extend its guarantee for the medical insurer United Medical Protection for another 12 months to December 2003.

The government was caught in the indemnity crisis in May when it offered a guarantee to United Medical Protection, Australia's largest medical insurer, after it went into provisional liquidation, throwing many doc-

tors' cover into uncertainty (*BMJ* 2002;324:1057).

Christopher Zimm *Sydney*

Aspirin use to be banned in under 16 year olds

The UK Medicines Control Agency has recommended that children under 16 should not be given aspirin, because of its links with Reye's syndrome, the rare but potentially fatal disorder found almost exclusively in children and adolescents.

The use of aspirin in children

under 12 has been banned in the United Kingdom since 1986, and in April this year the Committee on Safety of Medicines warned that it should also be avoided in children up to 15 if they were feverish.

But at its October meeting the committee concluded that its earlier advice was too complex for products available on general sale. This advice effectively required parents or children to diagnose fever. The committee has now recommended that the warning on aspirin products should read "Do not give to children aged under 16 years, unless on the advice of a doctor."

Sarah Macdonald *London*

The agency's statement on aspirin can be found at its website: www.mca.gov.uk/

Unsafe abortions cause 20 000 deaths a year in Nigeria

The Society of Gynaecologists and Obstetricians of Nigeria estimates that about 20 000 Nigerian women die from unsafe abortions each year.

The figure comes from studies carried out by the society and Nigeria's Ministry of Health. The estimate also tallies with the result of a nationwide survey conducted by Friday Okonofua, dean of the School of Medicine at the University of Benin and executive director of the Women's Health and Action Research Centre in Nigeria.

This survey showed that an estimated 610 000 unsafe abortions a year are carried out in Nigeria, and that about half of the 20 000 women who die from the complications of unsafe abortion are adolescents. The death rate from unsafe abortions is thought to be one of the highest in Africa.

Abortion is illegal in Nigeria, and most medical practitioners refuse to conduct abortions because of fear of the legal consequences. The result is that most women wanting an abortion tend to patronise unqualified practitioners who offer quick and cheap abortions.

Abiodun Raufu *Lagos*