

Cases of child malnutrition double in Gaza

The Israeli blockade of Gaza has produced a health crisis among Palestinians, according to the charity Christian Aid, with cases of child malnutrition doubling in just one year.

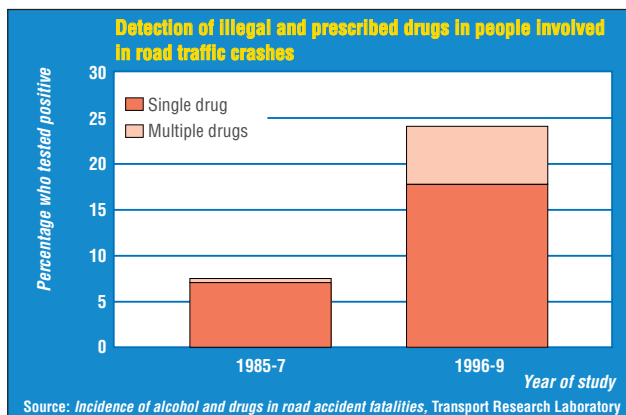
More than 100 000 Palestinians from Gaza previously earned their living in Israel, but the closing of the border has driven most into unemployment. This loss of income has devastated the fragile Palestinian economy, producing a further 76 000 job losses locally.

Costa Dabbagh, director of the Middle East Council of Churches, which runs two clinics for women and children in Gaza City, said: "We are treating more underweight and malnourished children, and this is a problem of the economy. Gaza suffers from 85% unemployment."

The two clinics run by the council have 590 cases of child malnutrition on their books. Rates of infection, anaemia, and other diseases have risen sharply. Another Palestinian medical charity, Ard El Insan Palestine, said that in 2000 it treated 2528 children under five years old for malnutrition, a figure that more than doubled the next year to 5702.

A report by the World Bank said: "The Palestinian Authority is effectively bankrupt since tax revenues have dwindled to a quarter of previous levels." The economy, says the report, is only kept afloat by foreign donations, while most health care is provided by local charities. Organisations such as Hamas, considered a terrorist network by most Western governments, owe much of their local popularity to their charitable clinics and food banks.

The Israeli government, while acknowledging that Palestinians were suffering, said their own leadership was to blame. A spokesman said: "Prior to September 2000, when Israel and the Palestinians were negotiating a land-for-peace deal, none of the current military measures, including closures, were in place. They have only been instituted as a direct consequence of the



BMA calls for government action on drugs and driving

The BMA has called on the UK government to develop a campaign to highlight that taking drugs—whether prescribed, over the counter, or illegal—can impair driving capacity in a similar way to alcohol.

The BMA has recommended that the government should coordinate scientific research to establish effective drug testing devices and should educate the public on the association between taking some drugs and impaired driving ability. These recommendations were put before parliament this week by Labour MP David Kidney as an early day motion, to provoke debate in the House of Commons.

To help publicise the problem, the BMA has developed a website that reviews trends in road traffic fatalities and injuries, as well as research on drugs and driving performance. The website highlights research from the Transport Research Laboratory showing that the number of people involved in fatal collisions who tested positive for illegal drugs increased sixfold between the periods 1985-7 and 1996-9 (figure).

Susan Mayor *London*

The BMA's drugs and driving website can be accessed from www.bma.org.uk

threat posed to Israeli life and limb by unchecked Palestinian terrorism."

Owen Dyer *London*

Parents agree to surgery for disfigured baby

A row over treatment of a severely disfigured baby in the north east of England was settled last week when her parents consented to surgery to rectify her breathing difficulties, after hospital authorities took the case to the High Court.

The dispute began when Suzanne Taylor and her husband, Aziz Rafi, took their 3 month old baby, Maria, to the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle upon Tyne, after travelling with her from Saudi Arabia,

where she was born. The baby suffers from Goldenhar's syndrome, a rare disorder with no known cause, which occurs in only 1 in 500 000 births.

Maria went into intensive care after developing acute respiratory arrest, and doctors wanted to perform a tracheotomy to open her airway and help her breathe more easily. But her mother refused to allow the procedure to go ahead. When she threatened to remove the baby from the hospital, the management obtained an emergency police protection order to prevent her removal.

After seven hours of meetings between the parents and hospital authorities and a hearing last week before a High Court judge in Leeds, agreement was reached on an urgent intervention. A statement from the court said: "It is stressed that the court has been

concerned today only with the question of immediate medical intervention to deal with Maria's acute breathing difficulties."

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Former health minister accused of diverting funds from health care

A former Australian federal health minister is fighting allegations that he "raided" more than £2m (\$2.8m; €3.2m) from projects on asthma and rural health to help fund the new Canberra headquarters of a doctors' lobby group that now employs him as a consultant.

Prime Minister John Howard has been drawn into the embarrassing row, promising parliament there would be an inquiry into the matter and a full reinstatement of the A\$5m to the original projects.

The former minister, Dr Michael Wooldridge, who retired from politics at the federal election last November, has denied any impropriety, claiming that the grant to the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners was made before the group made him any job offer.

But the opposition Labor party has called it "one of the worst examples of a rort [fast practice]" in the government's six years in office and joined calls for a two year ban on retired ministers working in areas of their portfolio responsibilities.

Dr Wooldridge said the money had not been taken from people with asthma, had not been spent, and was due to be returned to government coffers. Christopher Zinn *Sydney*

Think tank recommends free personal care for elderly people

A centre left think tank, regarded as close in political thinking to the Labour government, has called for all personal care as well as nursing care of elderly people to be free.

In a report published last week,