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Aspirin useful in primary prevention of heart deaths

Low dose aspirin significantly reduces the risk of cardiovascular events and deaths in people with at least one risk factor but no history of cardiovascular disease, according to a major primary prevention study published last week.

The study of 4495 people recruited in general practices throughout Italy showed that low dose aspirin (100 mg a day) reduced the risk of cardiovascular death by 44% at 3.6 years of follow up (*Lancet* 2001;357:89-95).

The proportion of participants dying from cardiovascular causes was 1.4% in those not receiving aspirin and 0.8% in those taking aspirin. The corresponding proportions for cardiovascular events were 8.2% and 6.3%. The study was terminated early when results from other trials showed benefit with aspirin in primary prevention consistent with the second planned interim analysis.

Susan Mayor *London*

Ireland sets up fund for patients who cannot get insurance

The Irish government is setting up an insurance fund to reduce some of the problems faced by people infected by contaminated blood products in getting insurance.

The idea for the fund—of one million Irish pounds (£820 000; $1.2m)—arose after a report commissioned by the Irish health department showed that people infected with hepatitis C through being given anti-D immunoglobulin and patients with haemophilia who contracted HIV from factor VIII and IX were being discriminated against when they tried to obtain certain kinds of insurance. Some were denied insurance; others faced premium loading.

AP PHOTO/OREGON REGIONAL PRIMATE RESEARCH CENTER

Scientists create first genetically modified monkey

Scientists have created the world's first genetically modified non-human primate. The modified rhesus monkey was born on 2 October last year at the Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland.

ANDi (pictured above) whose name is "inserted DNA" spelt backwards, was born after a marker gene for green fluorescent protein, which was first isolated from glowing jellyfish, was inserted into a mother monkey's egg.

Scientists say they will be able to use the same method to produce laboratory animals that carry genes for specific medical conditions, thus bridging the scientific gap between genetically modified mice and humans (*Science* 2000;291:209-312).

Abi Berger *BMJ*

The department said that more money would be added to the fund in the future. About 2000 people in the Republic of Ireland are known to be infected by contaminated blood products. The fund will become an insurance pool.

Doug Payne *Dublin*

Training scheme aims to create GP specialists in ENT

A new training scheme that aims to create "intermediate" GP specialists in ear, nose, and throat surgery is worrying the Royal College of General Practitioners, which believes that it could undermine the generalist nature of general practice.

Fifteen GPs from around the country began the 12 month diploma course last week. Once qualified, they will be able to perform about 15 ENT procedures and to refer some other patients direct for treatment in secondary care, bypassing the need for a patient to see a consultant first.

"The course will give GPs increased confidence in ENT so that they can take referrals from other GPs and triage who needs secondary care," said Mr Ram Dhillon, ENT consultant at Northwick Park Hospital in Harrow, Middlesex, who helped design the course in conjunction with Rila Publications. He claims that it could considerably reduce waiting lists for ENT procedures.

Dr Mayur Lakhani, vice chairman of the Royal College of General Practitioners, however, warned against what he called "diplomatosis," which he feared had the potential to undermine generalist medical practice. "We welcome anything that raises standards for patients, but there's a danger that GPs will feel that if they don't have a diploma in something they won't be able to handle it."

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

US takes precautions against bovine spongiform encephalopathy

Health officials in the United States have been taking stringent precautions to prevent bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

In addition to the long standing ban on imports of beef and bovine products from the United Kingdom, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has now told US drug manufacturers to stop making vaccines from bovine serum from countries where BSE has been found.

An FDA committee this month will also discuss extending its restrictions on people who can donate blood. It currently bans blood from people who have lived for six months or more in the United Kingdom since the late 1980s. It is considering extending this to people who have lived anywhere in Europe during the 1990s.

The committee is also expected to discuss whether to ban donations from deer and elk hunters, because a BSE related wasting disease has been spreading among elk and deer.

Fred Charatan *Florida*

"Sale of organs" to be investigated

A committee of experts has been appointed by Israel's health ministry to investigate claims by a Hebrew newspaper of illegal "sales of organs" and other alleged wrongdoings at Tel Aviv's L Greenberg Institute of Forensic Medicine, the country's sole institution for the performance of postmortem examinations in cases of unnatural death.

The ministry's director general, Dr Boaz Lev, named a retired district court judge to head the four member panel,

along with others from the ministry, a Beersheba hospital, and the Hebrew University's institute of applied chemistry.

In a weekend magazine cover story in the *Yediot Aharonot Daily*, reporters Ronen Bergman and Gai Gavra claimed that the institute—headed for the past 13 years by chief pathologist Professor Yehuda Hiss—had been involved in "organ sales" of body parts. Providing much ghoulish evidence, including "price listings" for leg and thigh bones and other body parts, the investigative journalists said that whole organs had been removed from corpses and transferred to universities for research and to medical schools for "practice" by students.

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich *Jerusalem*

Courts too deferential to doctors, says judge

The English courts were "excessively deferential" to doctors in the past in their reluctance to find them guilty of negligence, England's top judge said this week. Lord Woolf, the Lord Chief Justice (pictured), said that judges were now less willing to allow the medical profession to determine what amounted to negligent practice.

The change happened after it became clear to the courts that the hospitals and the medical professions could not be relied on to resolve justified complaints justly, he added.

Medical negligence litigation was "a disaster area," in which the courts grew increasingly conscious of the difficulties that bona fide claimants faced in succeeding.

IAN NICHOLSON/PA

Giving the inaugural provost's lecture at University College London, Lord Woolf outlined how the courts in recent years had refined the so called Bolam test for medical negligence. Under that test, a doctor would not be found negligent if his or her practice was accepted as proper by a responsible body of medical opinion.

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Evidence grows for safety of mobile phones

Regular use of mobile telephones does not seem to cause an increased incidence of brain tumours, but further studies are needed to account for longer induction periods, especially for slow growing tumours, according to the results of two new studies.

The studies, which together involved more than 1250 patients with brain tumours and an equal number of healthy individuals, found no increased risk of cancers among those who used the devices more frequently.

In the first study, researchers from New York found no increased risk of brain tumours among those individuals who used mobile phones for longer durations and no link between which hand routinely held the phone and the side of the head on which a cancer occurred (*JAMA* 2000;284:3001-7).

In the second study, another group of researchers, led by Dr Peter Inskip of the National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, compared 782 patients in whom brain cancer was diagnosed between 1994 and 1998 with 799 people who were admitted to the same hospitals for conditions other than cancer. The investigators found no evidence that the risks of brain cancer were higher among people who used mobile phones for 60 or more minutes a day or regularly for five or more years (*New England Journal of Medicine* 2001:344;79-86).

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Finnish study confirms safety of MMR vaccine

Jacqui Wise *London*

A large prospective follow up of the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccination programme in Finland has concluded that serious adverse events are rare and greatly outweighed by the risks of disease. The message is reinforced by two independent advisory bodies in the United Kingdom, which have carried out further reviews of the safety data.

The Committee on Safety of Medicines and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation independently examined all the data in an attempt to restore public confidence in the MMR vaccine. Immunisation levels have fallen below 75% in some parts of the United Kingdom, prompting fears of a measles outbreak. There have also been calls to give parents the option of having their children vaccinated separately against each of the three diseases.

The committee concluded that a large body of evidence exists to support the safety of the MMR vaccine, whereas the single vaccines are not licensed and so have not been as carefully reviewed.

Professor Liam Donaldson, chief medical officer for England, said: "Scare stories clearly worry parents, but giving children separate vaccines unnecessarily exposes them to the risk of life threatening infection. MMR remains the safest way to protect our children."

The Finnish study followed 1.8 million individuals for 14 years from the start of the MMR vaccination programme in 1982 (*Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal* 2000;19:1127-34). By the end of 1996 almost three million vaccine doses had been given, and 173 potentially serious reactions had been recorded as having possibly been caused by the vaccine. The most common event was febrile seizure.

The study's authors, from the Hospital for Children and Adolescents in Helsinki, reported that 45% of these events proved to be probably caused by some other factor, giving an incidence of serious adverse events of 3.2 per 100000 vaccine doses.

No case of inflammatory bowel disease or autism was detected, and the authors say that if there were an association between either of these conditions and the MMR vaccine, this prospective study design would undoubtedly have disclosed at least some cases.

Public concern about the MMR vaccine was sparked by Dr Andrew Wakefield from the Royal Free Hospital in London, who reported that some children developed symptoms of autism after receiving the vaccine (*Lancet* 1998;351:611-2). □

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