

## UK doctors protest at extension to nurses' prescribing powers

Michael Day *London*

Doctors' leaders have condemned the UK government's decision to give nurses and pharmacists virtually unlimited prescribing powers.

James Johnson, the BMA's chairman, has called for an urgent meeting with the secretary of state for health, Patricia Hewitt, to discuss the proposals, which took the BMA by surprise when they were announced last week. "It is difficult to see how healthcare professionals who are not trained to diagnose disease can safely prescribe appropriate treatment," he said.

Mrs Hewitt told the chief nursing officers' annual conference in London last week that from spring 2006 qualified "extended formulary nurse prescribers" and "independent pharmacist prescribers" would be able to prescribe any licensed

drug for any medical condition, with the exception of controlled drugs, such as diamorphine.

There are now over 6,100 extended formulary nurse prescribers who are qualified to prescribe from the Nurse Prescribers' Extended Formulary, which was introduced in April 2002 and which contains around 240 prescription only medicines. The "independent pharmacist prescriber" will be a new position.

Mrs Hewitt said, "Today's announcement means that the young person wanting to control their asthma or the terminally ill patient being cared for at home by a multidisciplinary healthcare team will soon find it easier and more convenient to get the medicines they need."

However, Paul Miller, the chairman of the BMA's Central

Consultants and Specialists Committee, described the extension of prescribing powers as "an irresponsible and dangerous move."

He said, "Patients will suffer. I would not have me or my family subject to anything other than the highest level of care and prescribing, which is that provided by a fully trained doctor."

The controversy was top of the agenda at this week's meeting of the BMA's General Practitioners Committee. Hamish Meldrum, the committee's chairman, said: "This announcement raises patient safety issues, and we are extremely concerned that the training provided is not remotely equivalent to the five or six years' training every doctor has undertaken."

Christine Beasley, the chief nursing officer, denied that the move would put patients at risk.

"As nurses and pharmacists undergo rigorous training before being able to prescribe, patients can be confident that they are receiving the safest, best possible care," she said.

But Dr Meldrum said, "While we support the ability of suitably trained nurses and pharmacists to prescribe from a limited range of medicines for specific conditions, we believe only doctors have the necessary diagnostic and prescribing training that justifies access to the full range of medicines for all conditions."

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health said that nurses would be expected to prescribe only within their area of expertise, "in the same way that you wouldn't expect an orthopaedic surgeon to be prescribing complex dermatology treatments." (See p 1154.) □

## Italy's smoking ban has led to an 8% drop in tobacco consumption

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

The restriction of smoking in public places in Italy has led to an 8% drop in cigarette consumption, a new study says.

And the ban on smoking in indoor public places has been almost universally accepted and does not seem to have had an adverse effect on business, say the authors of the study, which was published online ahead of print publication on 7 November in the *Annals of Oncology* (<http://annonc.oxfordjournals.org/>, doi: 10.1093/annonc/mdj070).

"The results of our study on the first extensive smoking ban in a large country show the advantages of smoke-free legislation, which may have major public health implications," wrote the authors, who come

from a number of centres and organisations in Milan and Rome, including the Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche, the Istituto Superiore di Sanita, the Istituto DOXA, and Gallup International.

On 10 January this year the Italian government banned smoking in all indoor public places, including cafes, restaurants (except for a few with separate and regulated smoking areas), airports, and railway stations, as well as in all public and private workplaces.

The authors also compared smoking consumption data from nationally representative, population based surveys and from official sales figures.

Data from official legal sales



A member of an anti-smoking group, Codacons, hunts down smokers in Rome with her "smoke-buster"

data show that 28.3 million kg of cigarettes were sold in Italy in the period January to April 2005. In the same period last year 31.1 million kg were sold.

"This corresponds to a decline in cigarette sales by 8.9%. This compares well with a 7.6% fall in consumption

revealed by the comparison between results from the 2005 survey and those from a companion survey conducted in March-April 2004," the authors wrote.

The fall in consumption from 2004 to 2005 was 23% for the 15-24 year age group. □