

## In brief

### Uganda to receive funds again:

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria has lifted its suspension of all its grants to Uganda, after reaching an agreement with the local coordinating committee and Uganda's Ministry of Finance to strengthen oversight and governance of grants worth \$367m (£210m; €314m). The grants were suspended in August after allegations of mismanagement were made (*BMJ* 2005;331:475).

### Patients prefer white coats:

Almost eight in 10 patients prefer their doctor to wear a white coat, says a study in the *American Journal of Medicine* (2005;118: 1279-86). Results from a survey of 400 people, mean age 52, showed that 76% favoured professional attire with a white coat ( $P < 0.0001$ ), followed by surgical scrubs (10.2%), business dress (8.8%), and casual dress (4.7%).

### Irish hospitals fail on hygiene:

The first national audit of hospital hygiene in Ireland has found that 91% of hospitals fell below the acceptable standard. However, it found that bed occupancy rates and whether or not cleaning was carried out by in-house staff had no direct effect on hygiene.

### Aid agency sets up halfway

**houses in Pakistan:** The humanitarian aid agency Care International is setting up halfway houses in Pakistan, where patients who are no longer on the critical list can be discharged from hospital yet can continue to receive care and treatment. The aim is to alleviate pressure on the country's healthcare system, which has been overburdened since October's earthquake, in which 86 000 people died.

### New cancer research centre

**opens in England:** The Manchester Cancer Research Centre has opened, bringing together scientists and researchers from the University of Manchester, the Paterson Institute of Cancer Research, the Christie Hospital, and Cancer Research UK. The centre will cover breast cancer, cancer in children, cell proliferations, and experimental cancer treatments.

## Dignitas is investigated for helping healthy woman to die

Michael Leidig *Vienna*

The Swiss euthanasia group Dignitas, which claims to offer a dignified death to terminally ill people, is being investigated after a healthy German woman was given a lethal mix of drugs by providing a false medical report.

Dignitas has helped 453 terminally ill Europeans, including 30 British people, to end their lives since it started in 1998. Assisted suicide is legal in Switzerland, but of the groups registered to provide such assistance only

Dignitas offers its services to foreign nationals, and it recently opened its first office abroad in Germany to recruit clients (*BMJ* 2005;331:984, 29 Oct).

In the incident under investigation a 69 year old woman, who has not been named for legal reasons, approached Dignitas with a medical report showing that she had terminal liver cirrhosis and was given a lethal dose of sodium pentobarbital.


But a routine autopsy carried

out by German authorities when the body was brought back from Switzerland exposed the report as a fake and added that although the woman had depression she was nevertheless physically fit.

The doctor used by Dignitas to help administer the lethal injection has also died. He committed suicide shortly after he was told that the German woman had not been terminally ill.

A subsequent investigation found that she had persuaded her GP in Augsburg to falsify the report by telling him she needed the report to get sick leave from work. The doctor told police he had no idea that the woman would use it to persuade Dignitas to help her commit suicide.

Hans-Juergen Kolb, Augsburg's senior public prosecutor, confirmed that the investigation included the German GP and the 71 year old Swiss doctor as well as Dignitas itself, although after the death of the Swiss doctor charges against him would be left on file once the report for prosecutors was completed.

But the founder of Dignitas, Ludwig Minelli, defended his organisation: "The doctor's report that I was given indicated the woman was suffering from cirrhosis of the liver as well as hepatitis. And in any case every person in Europe has the right to choose to die, even if they are not terminally ill." 



The managing chairman of the German hospice foundation, Eugen Brysch, protests against the opening of a Dignitas clinic in Germany

## Lords back bill to legalise assisted suicide

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

A private member's bill to legalise doctor assisted suicide in England and Wales was given an unopposed first reading in the House of Lords last week.

The Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill replaces a bill introduced by the crossbench peer Joel Joffe that lapsed in April when parliament was dissolved for the general election and that would have legalised voluntary euthanasia as well as doctor assisted suicide. A select committee that took extensive evidence on the earlier bill was divided on the issues. Lord Joffe has dropped provisions to

legalise voluntary euthanasia and concentrated solely on doctor assisted suicide.

The bill would not require changes to the law on murder but only a small amendment to the Suicide Act 1961, which makes it a serious crime to aid and abet a suicide.

Lord Joffe said the bill would enable an adult "who has capacity and is suffering unbearably as a result of terminal illness" to get medical assistance to die "at his own considered and persistent request."


Without government support the bill has no chance of reaching the statute book. But if it gets through its stages in the House of Lords a Labour MP, Joan Ruddock, has said that she will introduce the bill into the House of Commons. Ms Ruddock chairs the All Party Compassion in Dying Group of MPs.

Lord Joffe's revised bill is modelled on the law in Oregon,

where doctor assisted suicide is allowed. The doctor would not administer a drug to end the patient's life but would write a prescription for the patient to take.

A majority of the select committee of peers who considered the previous bill said they would support the revised bill.

Lord Joffe said: "I have listened to the views in parliament and among medical professionals and believe there is more support for a law which requires the patient to take the final act. This seems to reassure doctors that the patient is exercising a choice and is less difficult to them on a personal level."

"Patients want to exercise choice. Palliative care alone does not provide that." 

A copy of the Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill is available on the Voluntary Euthanasia Society's website ([www.ves.org.uk](http://www.ves.org.uk)).