

In brief

Cocaine use in European countries approaches US level:

Between 3 and 3.5 million people in the European Union and Norway have taken cocaine in the past year, says the latest annual report from the Lisbon based European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. The countries with the highest use—just over 4% of adults aged 15 to 34 years, close to the US level—are the United Kingdom and Spain. See www.emcdda.eu.int.

Private care centre opens:

Canada's first private primary healthcare centre has opened in Vancouver, promising "unhurried" appointments with family doctors and quick access to in-house specialists for an enrolment fee of \$C1200 (£600; \$1025; €870) and an annual charge of \$C2300.

China confirms avian flu deaths:

China has confirmed its second death from H5N1 avian flu, a 35 year old woman in Anhui province. The first confirmed death was in another village in the same province.

Health systems rely on foreign workers:

Foreign educated health professionals make up more than a quarter of medical and nursing workforces of Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (*Cahiers de Sociologie et de Demographie Medicales* 2005;45:287-306). Non-industrialised nations also rely heavily on foreigners. Half of the doctors in Namibia's public services are expatriates, and South Africa recruits close to 80% of its rural doctors from other countries.

GMC suspends two junior doctors:

The General Medical Council has suspended two junior doctors who had been convicted of manslaughter. Amit Misra and Rajeev Srivastava were senior house officers at Southampton General Hospital in June 2000 when they failed to recognise and treat toxic shock syndrome in a patient after a knee operation. Both received suspended 18 month sentences in 2003. The GMC last week suspended Dr Misra for one year and Dr Srivastava for six months.

Japanese encephalitis outbreak kills 1300 children in India

Ganapati Mudur *New Delhi*

An outbreak of Japanese encephalitis in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh has killed more than 1300 children over the past four months. It has rekindled calls from public health specialists for more intensive efforts to prevent future outbreaks.

Since the first cases in the current outbreak were reported in August, Indian authorities have reported 6171 cases nationwide, including 5700 cases and 1315 deaths in Uttar Pradesh alone.

"The outbreak in Uttar Pradesh is the longest and most severe in decades," India's health secretary, Prasanna Hota, said last week. "It has not burned itself out yet. But it's going away."

Government officials said

early and persistent rain through the monsoon season this year flooded rice fields and provided a breeding environment conducive for *Culex tritaeniorhynchus*, the species of mosquito that carries the Japanese encephalitis virus from pigs and infects humans through bites.


Although Japanese encephalitis has progressively expanded into new territories in India over the past decade, government figures show that over the past five years the annual number of cases had not exceeded 3000, and annual mortality had always remained below 500.

Uttar Pradesh has seen a steady increase in the number of cases of Japanese encephalitis in recent years. Public health experts believe that fresh outbreaks in

areas that have long been classed as high risk zones show a failure in public health measures.

"After an outbreak we typically see just fire fighting," said Pradeep Das, director of the Vector Control Research Centre in Pondicherry. "What we need is a sustained and concentrated effort to prevent future outbreaks," Dr Das said.

Relatively simple steps, such as promoting the use of bed nets, excluding pigs from human habitations, and educating people to avoid going outdoors during the hours when the mosquitoes are most active, have not received adequate investment or resources, Dr Das said.

A government doctor looking into the outbreak said the high numbers of cases and rapid progression to death in some villages seemed to have overwhelmed the medical infrastructure in parts of Uttar Pradesh. In the district of Saharanpur alone 97 villages have been affected. 

French government is urged to fight alcohol misuse

Brad Spurgeon *Paris*

A best selling author and former alcoholic has called for the French government to make draconian changes to the law to fight alcohol misuse in the same way that it now fights cigarette smoking and dangerous driving.

In his report, written with the help of eight experts, the journalist Hervé Chabalier criticises the government and medical system for taking alcohol misuse too lightly and claims that it is the most under-recognised illness in France.

Initiated a year ago by the previous health minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, the report nevertheless received no government funding and was published commercially as a 158 page book at the same time as it was submitted to the current health minister, Xavier Bertrand.

The report recommends:

- the creation of an alcohol foundation to be funded by taxes on alcohol, whose goal would be




Would these drinkers in a French bar be influenced by health warnings on wine bottles? 

to make the fight against alcoholism a national cause

- labelling every bottle with the words "Consuming alcohol is dangerous for health"
- forcing companies to establish strict drinking codes, including banning alcohol from company cafeterias, regulating the amount of alcohol at company parties, and instituting "zero alcohol tolerance" in high risk occupations such as the police and transport workers
- enforcing the law forbidding the sale of alcohol to minors and requiring shops to post signs saying that the sale of alcohol is illegal to

people under 16 years of age

- giving a member of staff in each hospital the responsibility of identifying people who had been admitted because of an accident caused by alcohol.

The report says that alcohol is directly responsible for 23 000 deaths a year, primarily from cancer and cirrhoses, and 45 000 deaths if alcohol related violence and accidents are included. 

Alcoolisme, le parler vrai, le parler simple (Alcoholism, Truly Spoken, Simply Spoken), is available from Éditions Robert Laffont (www.laffont.fr), price €15.