

## bmj.com news roundup

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### UK defies US by funding abortion programmes

The UK government is to contribute £3m (\$5.3m; €4.4m) over the next two years to the global safe abortion programme.

The programme, developed by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, aims to help meet an internationally agreed target to reduce mortality among mothers in many of the world's poorest countries. It will help member associations do more to stop unsafe abortions as well as help halt the decline in family planning and reproductive services in some countries, such as Peru.

The UK government's contribution flies in the face of restrictions introduced by the US government on funding of such organisations. The US's "global gag rule" prevents federal funding of any organisation that is involved in promoting or discussing safe abortion services, even when that work is funded from non-US sources. The rule even applies to organisations working in countries where abortions are legally available.

A report on abortion and poverty by the federation says that this year 19 million women will face serious injury, illness, or death as a result of abortions carried out by unskilled people in unsanitary conditions.

Lynn Eaton *London*

*Death and Denial: Unsafe Abortion and Poverty* is available at [www.ippf.org](http://www.ippf.org).

### Charities laud Scotland's free personal care for elderly people

The other countries of the United Kingdom could learn from Scotland's experience of introducing free personal care for elderly people, says a report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The report found that the policy had created a fairer system without undue extra public expenditure.



### Italy introduces "baby boxes" to save the lives of abandoned newborn babies

Special boxes that allow mothers to abandon their newborn babies with no questions asked have now spread from Germany and Hungary to Italy.

Germany and Hungary introduced such boxes in separate but similar initiatives about five years ago to help prevent dozens of deaths of newborn babies abandoned on the streets.

The boxes are the high tech, modern equivalent of the old medieval foundling wheels operated by orphanages in Padua from the 1400s until 1888. The wheels were a circular wooden board half inside and half outside the orphanages run by nuns. Mothers placed their unwanted newborns on the board and rang a bell, and the nuns would spin the board to find the child.

The modern incubators, dubbed baby post boxes by the European media, are installed in hospitals and can be opened from the inside or outside, much like bank deposit boxes. Mothers place the baby inside the heated box and can leave it safe in the knowledge that heat sensors will alert a trained medical expert to its presence.

Clare Chapman *Rome*

Jonathan Ellis, policy manager at Help the Aged, said the report provides a very strong case for making free personal care available to all elderly people in the UK who need it. "It would put an end to the shambolic and hugely over complex system around who pays what for different sorts of care," he said.

Scotland introduced free personal care—which involves help with such things as washing, dressing, and feeding—in 2001. Some leading Scottish politicians argued against it, claiming that it was an expensive policy that subsidised better off people, as poorer people already qualified for free support.

No other part of the UK has followed Scotland's lead, but

the foundation's report says there may be benefits in looking at the Scottish experience.

Bryan Christie *Edinburgh*

*Financial Care Models in Scotland and the UK* is available at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

### UK report supports EU proposals to test drugs in children

Half of the drugs used in the European Union to treat children and 90% of drugs given to newborn babies have never been tested or authorised for use in these age groups, warns a new UK report. The report supports

new European proposals to test drugs in children.

The report, published last week, supports the European Commission's proposal to introduce a common EU-wide procedure for testing and approving drugs for use in children as well as incentives to encourage manufacturers to develop drugs specifically for paediatric use.

The subcommittee of the House of Lords European Union Committee that developed the report said: "It is high time this was done, and the framework proposed seems right."

Susan Mayor *London*

*Paediatric Medicines: Proposed EU Regulation* is accessible at [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld/ldeucom.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld/ldeucom.htm).

### Doctors with history of drug misuse will face spot checks

Doctors with a history of substance misuse face spot drug tests, under new rules being drawn up by the General Medical Council.

Under the existing rules doctors who are under supervision for alcohol or drug misuse may be served notice that a urine or blood sample will be required in the coming weeks. "For obvious reasons this is not a satisfactory or foolproof way of doing things," said the GMC's president, Graeme Cato.

Last week, however, the GMC council endorsed recommendations from its Health Review Group for unannounced testing for chemicals to be brought in. Sir Graham said the on the spot tests, detailed arrangements of which have yet to be worked out, would apply to around 300 doctors.

"These recommendations endorsed by the council today will improve both monitoring and support of doctors," he said.

Michael Summers, the chairman of the Patients Association, said: "This is something that will give patients a greater feeling of safety."

Michael Day *London*