

In brief

US licenses first cervical cancer vaccine: The US Food and Drug Administration has approved Merck's vaccine Gardasil. The vaccine protects against infection with human papillomavirus types 16 and 18, which cause about 70% of cervical, anal, and genital cancers, and against types 6 and 11, which cause about 90% of genital warts. It has caused controversy because of the recommendation that it be used in girls and women aged 9 to 26 (*BMJ* 2006;332:814, 8 Apr).

Surgery helps obese patients keep weight off: Patients who have surgery for obesity have long term benefits, concludes an assessment of 236 patients who had a vertical banded gastroplasty or a gastric bypass between 1980 and 1997. They maintained a mean loss of 32.1 kg for 8.2 years after the operation (*International Journal of Obesity*, doi: 10.1038/sj.ijo.0803404).

When the pen is mightier than the word: A study based on questionnaires sent to 930 women patients aged 20 to 59 shows that enclosing a pen resulted in a 7% increase in the cumulative proportion of questionnaires returned (from 61.5% to 68.5% ($P=0.002$)). Neither sending by first class post nor providing a stamped envelope had a significant effect (*Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* 2006;59:747-54).

Women doctors in Romania to strike over retirement plans: Women doctors in Cluj-Napoca in central Romania are planning a hunger strike over proposed new nationwide legislation forcing them to retire at 57. They say pensioning them off at 57 would be a waste of their professional experience.

Drug halves duration of diarrhoea: A three day course of nitazoxanide has been found to reduce the duration of rotavirus diarrhoea from an average of 75 hours to 31 hours, shows a study in the *Lancet* of 50 children admitted to a Cairo hospital (www.thelancet.com, doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(06)68852-1). An estimated 500 000 children aged under 5 years die from rotavirus diarrhoea every year.

NHS computer programme is "roughly to timetable," IT chief says

Michael Cross *London*

The leader of the controversial scheme to computerise the NHS in England has defended the £20bn (£29bn; \$37bn) programme in advance of critical scrutiny by auditors and parliament. Richard Granger, chief executive of NHS Connecting for Health, last week described progress on the national programme for information technology (IT) as "roughly to timetable."

Mr Granger accused the news media of giving disproportionate space to isolated teething troubles caused by ill prepared NHS trusts and computer suppliers. In an attack on critics of the ethics of shared electronic health records he accused the medical profession of tardiness in waking up to the IT programme.

Parliament's public spending scrutineer the National Audit Office was due to publish its first report into the four year old programme this week. It is expected to assess the value for money achieved in contracts worth £6.3bn signed with private sector firms, as well as progress made so far towards the goal of creating accessible electronic medical records and other services.

The report is a year behind schedule, in part because the Department of Health did not agree with the contents of earlier drafts. "We are working to ensure the report is based on evidence and is balanced," Mr Granger said.

He admitted that "there are elements [in the programme] that are late."

Piloting of the new care records service, which will make summary clinical records available across the NHS infrastructure, will begin next year, he said, at least two years behind the original schedule.

On the continuing debate

over the content of summary clinical records, he criticised "trade unions" for waking up too late to the programme. Proposals for the summary record had been published two years ago after being seen by hundreds of doctors, he said. "However, the reality of having a working infrastructure hooked up to tens of thousands of organisations is finally entering the consciousness of people." The plan "is now being resisted by people, and let's recognise that's what's happening."

Nearly four years since taking up his post, he expressed his surprise at the passions generated by the world's largest civil IT programme. "I thought that saving thousands of lives [and] improving the effectiveness of hundreds of institutions would be a largely uncontroversial activity. I believe that's what's called naive." 



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Seven die in polio outbreak in Namibia

Pat Sidley *Johannesburg*

The Namibian government has launched a mass immunisation programme against polio after at least 34 people developed the disease and seven died from it.

However, the programme's success will depend on the country's ability to import sufficient vaccine and find the money to pay for it. The World Health Organization has committed itself to helping the programme, as has neighbouring South Africa.

The outbreak ended a 10 year period in which the country was free from the virus. Diagnosis of the cases was made rather

late in the day after reports of a "mystery disease" causing paralysis had surfaced. Samples were sent to South Africa to confirm the identification.

Namibia's northern neighbour, Angola, reported an outbreak of polio last year. Angola, still recovering from a long period of civil war, has had outbreaks of infection of Marburg virus as well. The reported cases of polio were hundreds of kilometres apart, prompting fears that there may have been more unreported cases in the country.

South Africa has now been placed on alert, and efforts aimed at keeping the country free of the disease have been put into place, said South Africa's health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang.

Last year South Africans were warned to get vaccinated before travelling to Angola—a

warning that will now apply to the considerable amount of travel between South Africa and Namibia.

The disease was reported in two towns in Namibia in separate areas.

There has been some controversy in Namibia over a reported delay in dealing with the outbreak. Some people have claimed that the outbreak had been known about for two weeks before the government confirmed it.

The government, however, seemed to have been stumped by the disease, which doctors considered a mystery, and it therefore failed to put adequate measures in place, not knowing what to do. People had been warned of the spread of the disease and told to wash their hands and drink clean water, *The Namibian* reported. 