

# bmj.com news roundup

Full versions of these stories are available at: [bmj.com/content/vol333/issue7567/#NEWS\\_ROUNDUP](http://bmj.com/content/vol333/issue7567/#NEWS_ROUNDUP)

## More US citizens lack health insurance

The number of US citizens without health insurance reached a record 46.6 million this year—an increase of 1.3 million on last year. This is according to the latest US Census Bureau's survey ([www.census.gov/cps](http://www.census.gov/cps)).

Almost one in six US residents lacks health insurance. The number of uninsured people has increased by seven million since 2000.

Nearly all the new people without insurance were working adults aged 18 to 64, who might previously have had employer based insurance cover. The proportion of people covered by employer based plans, the most common form of insurance, fell from 59.8% to 59.5% of the population.

The percentage of US residents with any form of private coverage, through an employer or otherwise, also decreased.

The most disturbing thing was the number of children without health insurance, which has grown for the first time in years, said Diane Rowland, the executive vice president of the Kaiser Family Foundation and the executive director of the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, which are non-profit making organisations ([www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)).  
Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

## Herpes increases because oral sex thought safe

Sexually active gay men are at increasing risk of contracting type 1 herpes simplex virus as a sexually transmitted disease, Australian researchers said this week.

As oral sex becomes more prevalent, sexual transmission of the infection—normally associated with cold sores around the mouth—is increasing, Andrew Grulich from the University of New South Wales and colleagues say in the *Journal of Infectious Diseases* (2006;194:561-70).

"We've demonstrated... the



DANIEL HUI/SHUTTERAP

## Fewer boys born in New York after 9/11 attacks

Anxiety and stress in New York city in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center five years ago may have resulted in the birth of fewer boys months later, research shows.

Based on more than 700 000 births in New York city between January 1996 and June 2002, the study shows that the birth sex ratio for the city dropped to below one in the January after the attacks—its lowest level (*Human Reproduction* 2006 Aug 26, doi: 10.1093/hum-rep/del283).

One theory is that the stress of the attack, particularly in women in the second and early third trimesters of their pregnancy, resulted in a disproportionate loss of male fetuses, so lowering the odds of a male birth.

Previous research has suggested that the sex ratio falls in populations subjected to external stressors, with the odds of a male birth falling with earthquakes, political and social upheavals, and economic downturns. Another explanation is that stress may reduce the conception of boys.

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

first prospective data to convincingly show that oral sex is a risk factor for HSV-1 [herpes simplex virus type 1] infection," Dr Grulich says. "What we're seeing is a really marked change in the epidemiology of the virus."

The researchers initially tested a community based cohort of 1427 HIV negative gay men in Australia for types 1 and 2 herpes simplex virus. Then they followed them up for a median of two years. Each man was interviewed in person each year, with telephone interviews about their sexual behaviour.

Initial prevalences for types 1 and 2 were 75% and 23%. During follow-up, the researchers found that men who were susceptible to infection at baseline were nearly four times more likely to acquire type 1 infection than type 2 infection.

Stephen Pincock *Sydney*

## US judge dismisses \$50m damages in Vioxx lawsuit

A New Orleans federal judge has thrown out a \$50m award made against the drug maker Merck after a former agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation had a heart attack after taking Vioxx (rofecoxib). The jury's conclusion on Merck's liability was reasonable, but its compensatory damage assessment was not, said Judge Eldon Fallon.

In his decision, announced on 30 August, the judge said that the \$50m (£26m; €39m) compensatory damages awarded to Gerald Barnett was "excessive under any conceivable substantive standard of excessiveness." He ruled that a new trial on all damages was necessary.

Judge Fallon held that the plaintiff's past and future medical bills, pain and suffering, and other intangible losses were legitimate reasons for compensation. But because Mr Barnett has retired he cannot recover lost wages or lost earning capacity. "Mr Barnett has returned to many of his daily activities. He may have lost 9-10 years of life expectancy," Judge Fallon wrote.

Merck is facing about 14 200 product liability lawsuits over Vioxx, and has set aside almost \$1bn for litigation. Since Vioxx claims began going to trial, in July 2005, Merck has won five verdicts and lost four.

Fred Charatan *Florida*

## British children get most skin cancer in Europe

The British Isles has the highest rates of skin cancer in children and adolescents in Europe, a study has found (*European Journal of Cancer* 2006;42:2170-82).

The incidence of malignant melanoma in adolescents is also increasing faster in the British Isles than in other regions, the study concludes, based on cases in 20 European countries.

On average, the incidence in Europe increased annually in adolescents, by 4.1% for melanoma and 2.5% for skin carcinoma, between 1978 and 1997.

"Increases in incidence over time were observed only for adolescents, possibly reflecting a change in risk factors relevant to adolescents and adults, but not to children," say the authors.

"The British Isles had the highest incidence of skin cancers in children and adolescents. For Europe, in adolescents, melanomas were more common in the North and West, skin carcinomas in the South and East."

The results of the study show that in the 19-20 year period of the study, the age standardised rate of malignant melanoma per million for adolescents in the British Isles increased from 5.31 to 22.9. In Europe as a whole it increased from 6.3 to 14.

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*