

In brief

Under 18s should not receive antidepressant: The antidepressant drug venlafaxine (Efexor/Efexor XL) should not be used to treat children and teenagers aged under 18, advises the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. See www.info.doh.gov.uk/doh/embroadcast.nsf

Gates Foundation puts more funding into malaria vaccine: The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is investing a further \$100m (£60m; €87m) in the malaria vaccine initiative, which was launched in 1999 with a \$50m grant from the foundation.

Dead husband can be named as father: Diane Blood, the widow who won her fight in the English courts to have children using her dead husband's frozen sperm, last week won her battle to have him recognised as the father of her sons. A bill to allow men whose children were conceived posthumously to be named as their fathers on their birth certificates has completed its final stage in the House of Lords.

Stem cell centre receives funding boost: The Medical Research Council has announced £1m (\$1.6m; €1.4m) funding to develop a new centre for stem cell research at Edinburgh University to speed up the development of stem cell treatments.

Doctors don't tell patients they are dying: A survey by Semmelweis Medical University in Budapest indicates that many Hungarian doctors do not inform terminally ill patients of their condition, although the country's health law requires them to do so. Some doctors reported that they only had routine conversations with patients.

Smoking ban may be extended: The European Commission is considering using its health and safety powers to table EU-wide legislation to ban smoking in public places. It is certain to be challenged by countries such as Greece, Italy, Spain, and France, although Ireland and the Netherlands will ban smoking in pubs and restaurants from next year.

WHO issues global alert after grim report on HIV/AIDS

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

The World Health Organization declared on Monday that the failure to deliver treatment to nearly six million people with HIV/AIDS in developing countries was a "global public health emergency."

Inspired by its success in fighting the virus that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the Geneva based health agency said it had joined forces with UNAIDS (the joint UN programme on HIV/AIDS) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria to send emergency response teams to the worst hit countries.

The organisation's previous global alerts were on SARS in March and before that on tuberculosis in 1993.

The latest alert came as UNAIDS released a new report concluding that, at the current rate of infection, there could be 45 million new cases of HIV by 2010. However, the report said



Dr Jong-Wook Lee: "We must change the way we think"

that if a comprehensive set of measures were implemented immediately in the worst hit countries it would be able to prevent 29 million new infections.

The report, which surveyed 103 countries in their fight against HIV/AIDS, was released at a United Nations session on HIV/AIDS in New York. It found that although spending on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment had doubled since 1999, there was still a vast gap in treatment.

"To deliver antiretroviral treatment to the millions who need it, we must change the way we think and change the way we

act," said Dr Jong-Wook Lee, WHO's director general.

Despite reduced prices, more funding, and a recent trade agreement to allow poor countries to import copies of patented drugs, only one million of some 5-6 million people with HIV/AIDS are expected to receive antiretrovirals by 2005.

At present only about 300 000 people in developing countries receive the drugs at all, and in sub-Saharan Africa, where 4.1 million people are infected, just over 1% or about 50 000 people had access to antiretroviral treatment at the end of 2002, the report said. □

NICE recommends photodynamic therapy for certain patients with macular degeneration

Susan Mayor *London*

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has recommended that certain patients with age related macular degeneration should have photodynamic therapy and that other patients should be given the treatment as part of a national study to provide more evidence on outcomes in clinical practice.

NICE has recommended that all patients with one type of "wet" age related macular degeneration—with a confirmed diagnosis of classic subfoveal choroidal neovascularisation but with no sign that this is occult and with at least 6/60 vision—should be considered for photodynamic therapy.

Photodynamic therapy uses a low power laser to activate a pre-

viously administered light sensitive substance to seal the leaky new blood vessels in the area under the retina associated with the condition.

The guidance states: "The evidence showed that for people within this group, PDT [photodynamic therapy] had a reasonable chance of halting or slowing the progression of the disease."

However, the guidance found that the evidence for benefit of photodynamic therapy was inconclusive for a second group of people with a different type of wet, age related macular degeneration with some occult subfoveal choroidal neovascularisation.

The independent advisory committee advising NICE recom-

mended that these people should have access to photodynamic therapy through clinical studies. For the first time as part of a NICE evaluation procedure, the Department of Health agreed to fund a nationwide clinical study to implement this recommendation. The results of this study will be taken into account when the guidance is reviewed in 2006.

David Barnett, chairman of the NICE appraisal committee and professor of clinical pharmacology at the University of Leicester, said, "Evaluation of use of treatment in practice will benefit future appraisals."

● In guidance on the use of new drugs for bipolar I disorder, NICE recommended that olanzapine and valproate semisodium should be considered alongside currently used agents for the treatment of patients with acute symptoms of mania associated with this condition. □

NICE's guidance can be found at www.nice.org.uk