

## In brief

### Salt can increase cancer risk:

Eating highly salted food can double a person's risk of stomach cancer, from 1:1000 to 1:500, says an online report due to be published next week in the *British Journal of Cancer* ([www.bjcancer.com](http://www.bjcancer.com)). The study looked at 40 000 Japanese men over an 11 year period and took account of smoking and drinking habits as well as diet.

### FDA bans ephedra:

The US Food and Drug Administration has declared a total ban on sales of dietary supplements that contain ephedra, to come into force early in 2004. 155 deaths and over 16 000 adverse effects have been associated with the herb, which contains amphetamine and is popular as an aid to weight loss. It is the first time the FDA has banned a dietary supplement since the 1994 Dietary Health and Supplement Act released herbs and supplements from FDA jurisdiction (see [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)).

### Psychiatrists in short supply:

Patients at Buckinghamshire Mental Health Trust are receiving poor continuity of care because of a shortage of psychiatrists and lack of leadership, says the Commission for Health Improvement. Recruitment and retention are both problems, it says. See [www.chi.nhs.uk](http://www.chi.nhs.uk)

### Ireland stalls on smoking ban:

The Republic of Ireland has delayed implementing its ban on smoking in the workplace, including all pubs and restaurants, scheduled to come into effect on 1 January. The Department of Health has yet to confirm a date, but the ban is expected to be introduced in March, after the expiry of a mandatory EU review period.

### US tops teenage obesity scale:

A study of adolescents in 15 countries shows that those in the United States have the highest prevalence of overweight (*Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 2004;158:27-33, [archpediatrics.com](http://archpediatrics.com)). Over 15% of 15 year old girls were overweight. But among 13 year olds, Ireland, France, and Greece also had a high prevalence. See [archpediatrics.com](http://archpediatrics.com)

## Cold is the main health threat after the Bam earthquake

Peter Moszynski *London*

Two weeks after the earthquake that hit southern Iran, killing over a third of Bam's population of 90 000, efforts have moved from the initial rescue operation to longer term rehabilitation and recovery.

The main hospital buildings in Bam, and most urban and rural health clinics in the area, have collapsed, and many medical staff and health workers were killed or injured. The earthquake ruined 95 of the area's 96 community healthcare units, all 23 health centres, and two of three hospitals, says the health ministry.

According to the World Health Organization, 12 000 of the 30 000 injured people have been airlifted to hospitals in other parts of the country. The earthquake, which measured 6.8 on the Richter scale, also destroyed more than 20 000 homes, leaving survivors desperate for shelter.

"The biggest health challenge we are facing at the

moment is the threat posed by the cold, which means that pneumonia and respiratory tract infections will increase, particularly among vulnerable children," said Dr Richard Munz, health coordinator in Bam for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The Iranian Red Crescent has distributed 92 000 tents, as well as 200 000 blankets, 56 000 items of clothing, and 51 000 paraffin heaters.

As well as emergency field hospitals provided by over a dozen countries, including a team from the United States, a fully equipped 250 bed referral hospital has been provided by the German, Finnish, and Norwegian Red

Cross Societies to cater to 250 000 people in the surrounding area.

Dr Hussein A Gezairy, regional director of WHO, said: "The priorities are to take care of the survivors, reduce the negative health impacts of the harsh environmental conditions on them, re-establish systems that keep a look out for communicable diseases, and—if they are detected—make sure that they are quickly controlled, and restart healthcare services ensuring adequate psychological counselling and care to those who survived the tragedy."

WHO is appealing for \$3.5m (£1.9m; €2.8m) for immediate use by the Iranian authorities to purchase supplies and provide vital public health services. □



Iran's Red Crescent members carry wounded people on to a military aircraft

## Immunologist accused of misconduct is allowed to relocate

Christopher Zinn *Sydney*

The leading Sydney specialist in immunology, Bruce Hall, who was accused of scientific misconduct, will escape any punishment after a controversial decision by his university to allow him to relocate his laboratory and staff.

The findings by the University of New South Wales are the latest turn in a saga that began in 2001 when the internationally renowned researcher into transplant rejection was said by three junior colleagues to have committed scientific fraud.

An initial inquiry held by the university had cleared Professor Hall of wrongdoing, but an independent inquiry headed by a former chief justice found that

he had lied in a research grant application and had shown a "reckless disregard for the truth."

The university's vice chancellor, Rory Hume, found that although Professor Hall had committed five acts of academic misconduct they were unintentional and were the result of a middle ear infection, workplace stress, and a stolen laptop computer, which led to errors rather than misconduct.

"My findings were sufficiently serious to warrant action, namely censure, in two cases," the vice chancellor said. "None of my findings however struck at the heart of Professor Hall's science, or questioned [its] validity ... and none warranted considera-

tion of dismissal."

Professor Hall, who has already lost funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council and faces an investigation by the federal police as a result of the allegations, said he would contest the censures and the proposal to move his laboratory.

"I knew two and a half years I didn't do anything wrong. I have never deceived anyone in my life," he said.

Professor Hume said the decision was the most difficult he had faced in 37 years as an academic. Because of the inherent complexity of the case he called for a new national tribunal to examine allegations of scientific misconduct.

Dr Chen, one of the researchers at Sydney's Liverpool Hospital who made the allegations, said the university was more concerned with protecting its reputation than finding the truth. □