

## In brief

**Cloning attempt fails:** Panos Zavos, the fertility doctor who said last month that he had transferred a cloned human embryo into the womb of a 35 year old woman (24 January, p 185), announced last week that his client had failed to become pregnant.

**GMC to consult on revalidation:** The General Medical Council has launched a consultation exercise on quality assurance in revalidation, aimed at gathering ideas on the current proposals. The council wants to ensure that the evidence that doctors will be asked to provide will be valid and reliable and capable of being verified. The paper is available on the GMC's website ([www.gmc-uk.org](http://www.gmc-uk.org)).

**Infectious disease expert resigns after conviction:** Dr Thomas Campbell Butler, the expert on plague who was recently convicted on charges relating to the disappearance of plague bacteria from his laboratory at Texas Tech University (*BMJ* 2003;327:1307), has resigned as a professor and has agreed to reimburse the university for contracts with drug companies. Dr Butler will be sentenced in early March.

**Danish court rules against Roche:** A Danish court has ruled that Roche, the manufacturer of the antimalarial drug mefloquine (Lariam), failed to issue patient information leaflets with the drug in Denmark, despite instructions from the government that it must do so. A traveller who experienced severe mental disturbances after taking two tablets successfully argued that neither he nor his doctor were aware of the side effects. The court ordered Roche to pay Kr10 700 (£980; \$1820; €1440) in compensation.

**MRC announces £5m for brain sciences research:** The Medical Research Council this week announced the award of 29 grants worth £5m (\$9.3m; €7.3m) as part of its initiative to strengthen UK brain sciences research. More information can be accessed at [www.mrc.ac.uk/funding-bscall-successful.htm](http://www.mrc.ac.uk/funding-bscall-successful.htm)

## Smoking is causing impotence, miscarriages, and infertility

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

New figures show that smoking is having a far more serious effect on sexual health than previously thought and is responsible for many thousands of cases of impotence, cervical cancer, miscarriages, and infertility in the United Kingdom each year.

More needs to be done to protect people from the harmful effects of passive smoking and also to discourage them from smoking, says the report from the BMA.

About 120 000 men in the United Kingdom aged 30 to 50 are impotent because of smok-

ing, according to new calculations in the report. In addition, smoking is implicated in about 1200 cases of malignant cervical cancer and around 3000 to 5000 miscarriages every year.

The report also points out that women who smoke reduce their chances of conceiving by up to 40% each month, and couples who smoke are less likely to respond to infertility treatment. In pregnancy smoking can increase the risks of miscarriage, certain fetal malformations, such as cleft lip and palate, and stillbirth and death of the newborn. It can also

triple the chances of having a low birthweight baby and reduce the quality of breast milk.

In infants and children passive smoking can cause sudden infant death syndrome, respiratory infections, and asthma.

Dr Vivienne Nathanson, the BMA's head of science and ethics, said: "The sheer scale of damage that smoking causes to reproductive and child health is shocking. Women are generally aware that they should not smoke while pregnant, but the message needs to be far stronger. Men and women who think they might want children one day should bin cigarettes." □

*Smoking and Reproductive Life: The Impact of Smoking on Sexual, Reproductive and Child Health* is available at [www.bma.org.uk](http://www.bma.org.uk)

## Increase in autism is due to changes in diagnosis, study claims

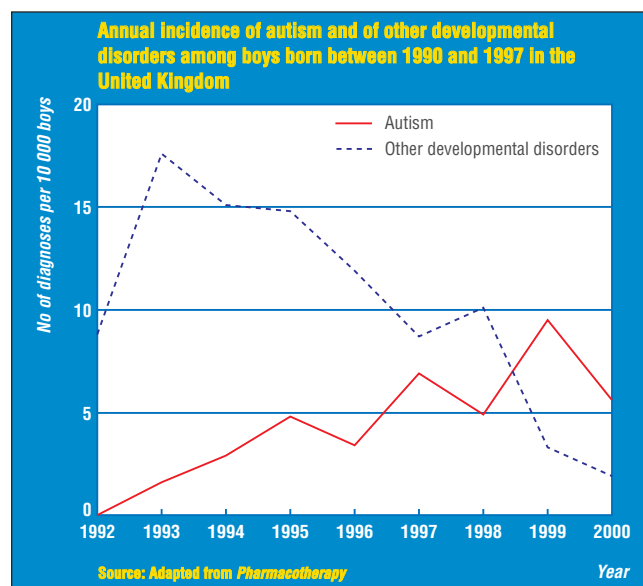
Vittal Katikireddi *BMJ*

The incidence of autism is increasing, but this is due to changes in diagnostic practice, a recent study has found.

The study, published in December in *Pharmacotherapy* (2003;23:1524-30), set out to identify whether the number of diagnoses of autism had progressively increased over the last decade and, if it had, what environmental exposures were related to the increase.

"We documented that the number of children [in the United Kingdom] diagnosed with 'behaviour' and 'developmental' disorders, but not autism, tended to decrease by about 20% per year from 1992 to 2000. By contrast, the diagnosis of autism increased by 20% per year during this time period," said Hershel Jick, lead author of the study and associate professor of medicine at Boston University School of Medicine.

"These data point to the conclusion that the increased incidence of diagnosed autism is primarily a reflection of changes in diagnostic practices, such as improved identification, avail-



ability of services, and other similar factors," conclude the authors.

In the study the authors initially reviewed existing research and found that the incidence of autism had increased.

"There is convincing evidence that there has been a major increase in the number of children diagnosed as autistic in the United Kingdom, United States, and Denmark," said Professor Jick.

The researchers then compared 126 autistic boys with boys who did not have autism and attempted to identify any factors that could be associated with the condition.

"We found that there was no

difference in the frequency of medicines or vaccines, including MMR [the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine], received by autistic boys compared to normal boys. Similarly, there was no difference in the medicines or illnesses present in the mothers of autistic boys during pregnancy compared to mothers of normal boys. We conclude that neither medicines nor medical illness were responsible for the increase in autistic children over time," Professor Jick said.

"The study also provides compelling evidence that vaccines, including MMR, are not the cause of the rise," he added. □