

In brief

Gates announces \$83m for research into TB vaccine: The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has announced an \$82.9m (£43.9m; €64.9m) grant to the Aeras Global TB Vaccine Foundation, based in Bethesda, Maryland, to support development of new vaccines to prevent tuberculosis, which kills nearly two million people a year.

Maggots on prescription: A decision by the Prescription Pricing Authority means that GPs will be able to prescribe sterile maggots of the common greenbottle *Lucilia sericata* for the treatment of all types of infected and necrotic wounds for patients in the community. The maggots, marketed under the tradename LarvE, are produced by the Biosurgical Research Unit in Bridgend, south Wales, which is part of the Bro Morgannwg NHS Trust.

Both life expectancy and infant mortality rise in the United States: Overall life expectancy in the United States reached a new high of 77.4 years in 2002, up from 77.2 in 2001, the National Center for Health Statistics has reported. But infant mortality also increased—from a rate of 6.8 infant deaths per 1000 live births in 2001 to a rate of 7.0 per 1000 births in 2002.

CHI seeks views of children and young people: The Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) is planning to ask more than 120 000 young patients, and their parents or carers, for their views on the NHS services they have received. The results will provide feedback for trusts about the quality of their care and will also be used by CHI in future inspections. More information can be found at www.nhssurveys.org

Nurse held after patients develop breathing problems: A 23 year old male nurse was arrested last week after 10 patients in his care developed breathing difficulties without an obvious cause. The man, who was later released on police bail, has been suspended from his job at the 200 bed Horton Hospital in Banbury, Oxfordshire, pending an investigation.

GlaxoSmithKline staff told not to publicise ineffectiveness of its drug

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

CMAJ (the journal of the Canadian Medical Association) has published details of an internal document from the drug company GlaxoSmithKline that advised its staff to withhold the findings of a clinical trial in 1998 showing that the antidepressant paroxetine had no benefit in treating adolescents.

The association has publicised the document on its website in an early release of its Analysis column (www.cmaj.ca).

Last year, the drug, which is marketed as Paxil in North America and Seroxat in the United Kingdom, was banned for paediatric use in several countries because of a perceived increased risk of suicide.

The UK Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory

Agency advised doctors last June that they should not prescribe the drug to patients under the age of 18.

The *CMAJ* column says the confidential document was prepared by the central medical affairs team, a division of SmithKline Beecham, the company that subsequently merged with GlaxoWellcome to form GlaxoSmithKline. The column says the document gives guidance on two clinical trials, study 329 and 377, whose results were, according to the document, "insufficiently robust" to support application to regulatory authorities for a label change approving Seroxat for use in children and adolescents.

The team recommended the firm "effectively manage the dis-

semination of these data in order to minimize any potential negative commercial impact."

Study 329, conducted in the United States from 1993 to 1996, showed paroxetine to be no more effective than a placebo, while study 377 showed that the placebo was "actually more effective than the anti-depressant."

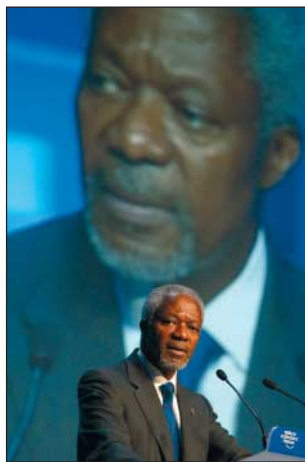
The central medical affairs team's document is quoted as saying that "it would be commercially unacceptable to include a statement that efficacy had not been demonstrated, as this would undermine the profile of paroxetine."

A spokeswoman for GlaxoSmithKline, Jill McKinlay-Morris, told the *CMAJ* that "the memo draws an inappropriate conclusion and is not consistent with the facts... GSK abided by all regulatory requirements for submitting safety data. We also communicated safety and efficacy data to physicians through posters, abstracts, and other publications." □

100 000 children die needlessly from cancer every year

Vittal Katikireddi *BMJ*

Children throughout the developing world lack access to even the most basic cancer treatment and pain relief, leading to the needless deaths of 100 000 children every year, say two leading cancer organisations.



Cancer groups are asking the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, for support

The organisations say that cooperation is needed between the World Health Organization, the World Trade Organisation, and the pharmaceutical industry so that the price of anticancer drugs can be reduced.

Cancer Research UK, which funds the most research into childhood cancers in Britain, and the International Confederation of Childhood Cancer Parent Organisations say that of the 250 000 children who develop cancer every year, 80% die without adequate treatment. Many do not even receive morphine, the organisations state.

The confederation believes it is realistic to aim for a 50% survival rate among these children, saving 100 000 lives.

Simon Lala, chairman of the confederation, said: "Over the past 10 years, the confederation has worked with professional organisations around the world to improve conditions for children with cancer.

"We know from this that lives can be saved, but there is still much to do. We need to accelerate the rate of progress, and I appeal to the media to support us in raising awareness of the plight of children with cancer worldwide."

The charities chose to highlight the issue to coincide with

the international childhood cancer day, 15 February. The confederation is now appealing to Kofi Annan, secretary general of the United Nations, and Hilary Benn, the United Kingdom's international development secretary, for an increase in funds to tackle childhood cancer in the developing world.

Geoff Thaxter, vice president of the confederation, said: "There is a great willingness among families and professionals involved with childhood cancer to reduce the 100 000 needless deaths a year—these children have a right to life. If we can get the support of Kofi Annan and governments around the world, this can all be done more quickly. We are not passing the problem to them to solve; we want their help in working together."

Professor Tim Eden, president elect of the International Society for Paediatric Oncology, said: "There's an assumption that treating cancer is expensive, but it doesn't have to be. For some types it can cost as little as £20 [\$38; €30] to cure a child. By developing treatment regimes that take account of a country's medical facilities and providing proper training and advice to local doctors, we can make great progress on relatively limited funds." □