

In brief

Report finds methadone users commit less crime: A review of the court appearance records of 11 126 users of heroin in New South Wales, Australia, by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research has found that those treated with methadone commit substantially fewer incidents of robbery, breaking and entering, and car theft. See www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/bocsar1.nsf/pages/index

Psychiatrists launch video about children whose parents have mental illness: The Royal College of Psychiatrists has launched a video teaching pack to improve the understanding of the needs of up to 175 000 children whose parents have mental illness. *Being Seen and Heard* can be ordered for £32.25 from the college (tel 020 7235 2351 ext 146).

Woman dies after blood group error during transplantation: Prosecutors in Switzerland have opened a criminal investigation into the death of a 57 year old Swiss woman last month after she received a heart transplant with the wrong blood group.

WHO appeals for \$5.4m for Darfur region of Sudan: The World Health Organization has appealed to donors for \$5.4m (£3m; €4.6m) to provide some 1.2 million people with basic health supplies. Aid agencies say government backed, ethnic Arab militias have killed 30 000 civilians in "ethnic cleansing" in the Darfur region since February 2003.

GP numbers rise: The number of GPs working in the NHS is now 30 598. The total exceeds by 131 the government's target set out in the NHS Plan in 1999 for an extra 2000 GPs by March 2004. But the BMA claims that many of these GPs will be working part time and that the increase is "at best" 1323 full time equivalent GPs.

Abortion rally takes place in Washington, DC: An estimated 500 000 to 800 000 people marched through Washington, DC on 25 April in protest at what they saw as attempts by the pro-life lobby to undermine existing rights to legal abortion in the United States.

US junior doctors found to be ignorant of drug companies' tactics

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

Although drug companies spend billions of dollars on marketing their products and have been successful in influencing doctors' prescribing decisions, a new study shows that only a small proportion of medical residency programmes in the United States teach doctors how to deal with such pressures (*Academic Medicine* 2004;79:432-7).

Dr Raquel Watkins, lead author of the study and assistant professor of internal medicine at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center, North Carolina, said there is "a compelling need for innovative approaches to provide residents with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to interact appropriately with pharmaceutical representatives."

"The goal of pharmaceutical industry marketing is to change

physicians' behaviours. Recent literature shows that gifts influence the prescribing patterns of physicians; can have a negative impact on physicians' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours; and result in increasing costs," the article says.

To be informed decision makers, doctors need to be aware of this potential conflict of interest, Dr Watkins said. Yet, she and co-author Dr James Kimberly Junior, also assistant professor at Wake Forest, found through a review of published manuscripts that only 25% of internal medicine residency programmes in the United States have formal instruction on how to interact with drug companies' sales representatives.

The authors say that a questionnaire survey at their universi-

ty medical centre in 2001—with a 97% response rate for residents and 79% for faculty members—found low levels of knowledge about the impact of marketing strategies on prescribing patterns.

According to the survey less than 9% of the residents—who had trained at 46 different medical schools—were familiar with guidelines from professional organisations and research on interactions between doctors and the industry.

The authors developed a six hour curriculum to teach internal medicine residents about the ethics of their interactions with drug company representatives and about the potential for their prescribing patterns to be influenced. Training included videotaped interviews with patients in which they said how they were affected by drug prices and gave their thoughts on gifts from drug companies to doctors. The residents were taught how to critically interpret promotional materials and marketing strategies. □

Cardiovascular disease threatens developing countries

Susan Mayor *London*

Cardiovascular disease is a far greater public health problem in developing countries than previously realised, particularly in younger people, says a report published this week.

The report combined population estimates for five lower to middle income countries—Brazil, South Africa, the Russian republic of Tatarstan, India, and China—with current death rates and workforce data to calculate the effects of cardiovascular disease on society and on the workforce.

Results showed that heart disease and stroke were far more urgent threats to global health than previously thought. A conservative estimate showed that at least 21 million years of future productive life were lost each year in the five countries because of cardiovascular disease. Future predictions were even more disturbing, with the number set to rise to 34 million

years of life lost by 2020.

Mortality from cardiovascular disease among working age people in India, South Africa, and Brazil was found to be one and a half to two times as high as that of the United States. Age adjusted death rates for the disease fell by a fifth during the 1990s in the United States but increased by 36% in Tatarstan.

The report showed a major impact of cardiovascular disease on younger people. Death rates for people aged 35-64 years were substantially higher in Brazil, South Africa, Tatarstan, and India than in the United States. In South Africa, 41% of all deaths from heart disease occurred in people aged 35-64 during 2000-3, with a similar high figure (35%) in India.

The report suggested that the solution was to make greater efforts to prevent cardiovascular disease. It recommended several measures: a reduction in tobacco production and consumption; strategies to improve nutrition, including food production subsidies; and educational strategies, including school programmes on healthy nutrition and physical activity.

Derek Yach, a representative of the director general of the World Health Organization, said:

"Very little international aid goes into CVD prevention and control." Only 0.1% of a total of \$2.9bn (£1.6bn; €2.4bn) funding from overseas development agencies for 2002 went on chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease. He suggested this should greatly increase, but not to the detriment of acute programmes such as malaria and tuberculosis prevention. □

A Race Against Time: The Challenge of Cardiovascular Disease in Developing Economies is available at www.earthinstitute.columbia.edu



P. VIKTOR/WHO

Tobacco consumption has to be tackled to reduce heart disease in developing countries