

In brief

AIDS fund announced: The OPEC Fund for International Development is allocating \$4m (£2.2m; €3.4m) to a new global initiative on HIV/AIDS—a joint initiative with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), which will match the contributions in kind. It aims to improve the response to AIDS in 14 targeted countries: Bangladesh, Cuba, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Jamaica, Jordan, Mali, Mauritania, Nicaragua, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Tunisia.

US children's blood pressure rises: Systolic and diastolic blood pressure levels for US children and teenagers rose substantially between 1988-94 and 1999-2000, says a new study involving 5582 children aged 8-17 years (*JAMA* 2004;291:2107-13). Average systolic blood pressure rose from 104.6 mm Hg to 106 mm Hg during the study period, and average diastolic pressure rose from 58.4 mm Hg to 61.7 mm Hg.

UK government to appoint equality champion: The UK government is advertising for an "equality tsar" to tackle racism in the NHS. The advertisement in the *Guardian* said the government is looking for a "high flyer with a strong reputation for promoting equality." The salary is £95 000.

Cloning licence application to be heard: The first application for a licence to allow researchers in the United Kingdom to clone a human cell could be heard by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in June. It was submitted in February by researchers from the NHS funded Newcastle Fertility Centre for Life. See www.hfea.gov.uk/Research/Researchapplications

Simvastatin to be available over the counter: The cholesterol lowering agent simvastatin is to be switched from a prescription-only product to an over the counter one (available from UK pharmacies), the Department of Health announced this week. Simvastatin (Zocor) lost its patent protection in May 2003.

Pregnancy and childbirth are leading causes of death in teenage girls in developing countries

Susan Mayor *London*

Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death in young women aged 15 to 19 in developing countries, warned a report published last week. An estimated 70 000 adolescent mothers die each year because they have children before they are physically ready for parenthood, the report says.

The fifth annual *State of the World's Mothers* report, published by the international charity Save the Children, found that 13 million births (a tenth of all births worldwide) each year are to women aged under 20, and more than 90% of these births are in developing countries.

Overall, a third of women from developing countries gave birth before the age of 20—ranging from 8% in east Asia to 55% in west Africa. Analysis of the most recent and best quality data from government statistics for different countries or from international surveys showed that complications from pregnancy and childbirth were the leading cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19 years in poorer countries.

Figures showed that girls in this age group were twice as likely as older women to die from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Their babies were 50% more likely to die than children born to women in their 20s. The youngest mothers—those aged 14 and under—faced the greatest risks. Research from Bangladesh showed that the risk of maternal mortality may be five times higher for mothers aged 10 to 14 than for mothers aged 20 to 24.

Obstructed labour was found to be common in teenage girls, resulting in increased risk of infant death and of maternal death or disability. The report also showed that young mothers and their babies were at greater risk of contracting HIV.

The report included an "early motherhood risk" ranking that identified countries where motherhood was most devastating for young girls and their babies. Nine of the 10 highest risk countries were in sub-Saharan Africa,

with Niger, Liberia, and Mali topping the list. Countries outside Africa with high risk scores included Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Guatemala, Haiti, Nepal, Nicaragua, and Yemen.

In the 10 highest risk countries, more than one in six teenage girls aged 15 to 19 gave birth each year and nearly one in seven babies born to these teenagers died before the age of 1 year. The rankings were based

on marriage and birth rates among teenage girls in each country as well as on infant mortality for children born to teenage mothers.

The risk of maternal mortality was one in seven in Niger (at the bottom of the ranking) but only one in 29 800 in the lowest risk country, Sweden.

Birth rates for adolescent girls in the United States were higher than in any other industrialised country, and in some remote rural communities, adolescent birth rates are higher than in many developing countries. □

State of the World's Mothers is available at www.savethechildren.org.uk

