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Meningitis vaccine recommended for three groups of young people

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended the use of a new vaccine against meningitis for three groups of young people: children aged 11 and 12 years, students entering high school, and new students at college who will be living in student accommodation. The American Academy of Pediatrics also released similar recommendations.

The new meningitis vaccine, MCV4, was approved in January by the US Food and Drug Administration and offers protection for seven to eight years against meningococcal disease caused by serogroups A, C, Y, and W-135.

Another vaccine that was previously available conferred immunity that lasted only three to five years. The availability of the improved vaccine was one reason cited for the CDC's embrace of these new recommendations. Both vaccines are about 85% effective.

The new vaccine does not protect against meningococcal disease caused by serogroup B bacteria. *Haemophilus influenzae* type b disease was the leading cause of bacterial meningitis in children younger than 5 years old until vaccination for all infants was introduced in the late 1980s.

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

European GPs don't know how to deal with obesity epidemic

European GPs know that they are facing an obesity epidemic but do not know what to do about it, a debate on obesity heard last week. "European trends in obesity are now in parallel with [those in] the United States," Christian Fabian, president of the European Union of General Practitioners and a GP in Sweden told the meeting. The debate was



Russia's youth faces worst crisis of homelessness and substance misuse since second world war

Russia's youth is caught up in one of the worst health crises in the country's history, with unprecedented numbers of children and teenagers turning to cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs, Russia's interior minister has warned. Rashid Nurgaliyev blamed the situation on the virtual collapse of the Russian health service in 1991, when the Soviet Union fell, and on the economic misery and moral crisis that has affected the country ever since.

He said that four million Russian teenagers were drug users (of a total population of 144 million) and that one million of those were hardened addicts. Deaths from drugs in minors have also skyrocketed, by a factor of 42 compared with the 1980s. Many of the affected children live on the streets, driven out of their homes by violent alcoholic parents.

Mr Nurgaliyev noted that Russia was home to 700 000 orphans, a number higher than at any other time since the second world war and a state of affairs that leaves them particularly vulnerable.

Andrew Osborn *Moscow*

organised by the UK company Medical Futures, with a panel of obesity experts and delegates from the union.

Susan Jebb, head of nutrition and health research at the Medical Research Council in Cambridge, said, "We have a small window of opportunity to do something to slow down this trend, especially in children, before it is too late."

European statistics show that in most European countries the prevalence of adult obesity has risen by 10%-50% in the past 10 years. In Germany, the current incidence and prevalence of obesity is even higher than that in the United States.

In a pilot questionnaire sent by Medical Futures to GPs across Europe, the 173 respondents (out of a survey of 1000 GPs) seemed reluctant to prescribe drugs for their obese patients,

but about half of them said that they would counsel and educate them.

Rhona MacDonald *Oxford*

EU supports testing for children's drugs

European health ministers are giving strong backing to moves to encourage pharmaceutical companies to research and develop medicines specifically for children.

About a quarter of the EU's 450 million inhabitants are younger than 19, but more than half of all medicines used to treat children have not been specifically tested or authorised for use by this age group.

The draft pan-European legislation, which was examined by

health ministers in Luxembourg on 3 June and will be voted on by the European parliament in July, aims to establish incentives and procedures for developing paediatric medicines.

A strong incentive to encourage pharmaceutical companies to become more active in this area is the suggestion that they should enjoy a six month extension to the supplementary protective certificate—the equivalent of prolonging their patent for this period—for medicines they develop.

Several health ministers and the European Generic Medicines Association, which represents over 500 companies and their subsidiaries throughout Europe, believe that the incentives may be too generous. It estimates that the additional six months' protection would produce €50m (£34m; \$61m) for a mid-range product with annual sales of €100m.

Rory Watson *Brussels*

UK proposes reforms for research ethics committees

NHS research ethics committees (RECs) should work more closely with each other, have a clearer remit, and improve training for their members. These were the recommendations of a report published this week that was designed to streamline the procedures for ethical review of research proposals for studies to be done in the NHS.

The committees give independent advice on whether proposals for research studies in the NHS comply with ethical standards. The report, from the UK Department of Health, was developed in response to criticisms from researchers that the committees are uncoordinated, application procedures are time consuming, and decisions are unpredictable.

The report recommended that committees should work in a more coordinated way as a nationally networked system, with fewer committees meeting more often: "We believe that a smaller number of research