

bmj.com news roundup

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Foundation trusts revel in their new powers, report says

Foundation trusts are making the most of their freedoms to invest in new facilities and beds but are not outperforming ordinary NHS trusts, a review by the Healthcare Commission concluded this week.

The review, the first of its kind and the result of visits to the first 20 foundation trusts, also found that four trusts were projecting large deficits of more than £3m (\$5.3m; €4.4m).

The commission concludes that, overall, foundation trusts had "hit the ground running" and have wasted no time exercising new freedoms to borrow money and to speed up decisions on opening new wards and operating theatres.

For example, it took just 11 weeks for the University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust to plan additional wards and modular theatres—whereas it would possibly have taken two and a half years for the plan to go through the strategic health authority's processes, the Commission said. (See p 59.)

Rebecca Coombes *London*

The Healthcare Commission's Review of NHS Foundation Trusts can be found at www.healthcarecommission.org.uk

US doctors and public favour annual check ups

Most primary care doctors in the United States and their patients want annual physical examinations to screen for asymptomatic problems, a study has found. Primary care doctors also say that annual check ups may help build a relationship with the patient.

A study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* (2005;165:1347-52) found that two thirds of doctors in internal medicine, family practice, and obstetrics and gynaecology thought an annual check up was necessary and that 88% perform them.

More than 90% of primary care doctors responding to a survey said that an annual check



Medieval guide warns that sex is harmful for people with "cold or dry breathing"

These illustrations are taken from a group of 130 Italian drawings on display at the Sam Fogg museum in London.

The drawings, done in the 1450s by artists in the circle of Mantegna, appear in the *Tacuinum Sanitatis* (Table of Health), a medieval guide to health and wellbeing. The guide was translated from Arabic into Latin by the 11th century physician Albucahis (Al Zahrawi).

The picture (above right) shows two women making pasta. The text tells us that pasta is good for the chest and throat but is harmful to weak intestines and stomach. The other picture (above left) shows a man dressed in red who is harvesting fennel, which is said to be good for the eyesight but bad for menstrual flow.

Insomniacs and people looking for a foolproof excuse not to have sexual intercourse with their partner may find the guide particularly useful. Apparently conversation causes drowsiness and boredom so is ideal for those wishing to fall asleep; and sexual intercourse, though useful for the preservation of the species, can be harmful to people with cold or dry breathing.

Giselle Jones *BMJ*

The exhibition runs from 1 to 29 July at Sam Fogg, 15d Clifford Street, London, W1.

up provided time to counsel patients about prevention and that it improved doctor-patient relationships. Most also thought it detected subclinical illness and was desired by patients.

Allan Prochazka, professor of internal medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, Denver Veterans Affairs Medical Center, said, "From the doctors' side, a high percentage are in favour, responding to what patients want... My take is that testing should be individualised and tailored. It should be targeted to the 'big ticket' problems: cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, the major cancers, but individualised based on family history."

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

WHO puts abortifacients on essential drug list

The World Health Organization has put two abortifacient drugs on its list of essential medicines to offer an alternative to surgical methods that are often used in developing countries.

The combination of mifepristone followed, 36 to 48 hours later, by misoprostol, given under "close medical supervision" to induce abortion within nine weeks of conception has been added to the WHO list. WHO recommended that the drugs be used "where permitted under national law and where

culturally acceptable," a point added by WHO's director general himself.

The approval will be of particular benefit to developing countries. Of the 19 million unsafe abortions taking place in the world each year, 18.5 million occur in developing countries. About 68 000 women die each year from unsafe abortion.

Liza Gibson *London*

GPs are accused of missing warning signs in deaths of Shipman's patients

Four general practitioners appeared before the General Medical Council this week accused of failing to notice warning signs associated with the deaths of patients of the serial killer Harold Shipman.

Alastair MacGillivray, Jeremy Dirckze, Stephen Farrar, and Susan Booth, all of Hyde, Greater Manchester, are accused of neglecting to use proper clinical judgment in confirming the cause of death when signing a total of 214 cremation forms over a period of 18 years. Of these 214 patients 124 were later found to have been unlawfully killed.

The Shipman inquiry criticised the GPs for failing to note contradictions in Dr Shipman's accounts of his patients' deaths.

Dr Dirckze, who counter-signed 35 cremation forms for Dr Shipman between 1995 and 1998, told the GMC's fitness to practise panel that he had trusted Dr Shipman "implicitly."

Only on Dr Shipman's arrest in 1998, he said, had it become apparent that he was reporting vastly greater numbers of deaths of patients than other GPs. "At the time, each case in its own right seemed perfectly plausible and reasonable, and I couldn't see that anything unusual was developing.

"We didn't even dare consider that Shipman was deliberately harming his patients. It wasn't something that we thought possible. Mutual trust in your colleague meant that we didn't think a doctor could do something like that," he said.

Owen Dyer *London*