

In brief

Research finds MMR vaccine safe: Finnish research suggests that fears over the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine are unfounded (*Lancet* 1998;351:1327-8). None of the children traced in a study of three million jabs developed any signs of autism or similar syndrome, as had been suggested by British research (*Lancet* 1998;351:637-41).

US health insurers limit payments for impotence pill: The large demand for sildenafil citrate (Viagra) has caused Cigna Healthcare to limit prescriptions for the drug to six pills a month. Since the drug became available last month about 20 000 prescriptions a day have been issued. Kaiser Permanente say they will reimburse only half the cost of the drug instead of the customary 80%.

Transgenic pig liver could be used for dialysis: Imutran/Novartis is to use a transgenic pig liver as a temporary dialysis machine if trials show no evidence that retroviruses cross the species barrier in people already treated with pig tissue. The pig liver would take over the function of the diseased liver for up to 72 hours.

Surgeon urges end of laser treatment: William Jory of the London Centre for Refractive Surgery has urged that laser treatment to correct shortsightedness should cease because 12% of patients had significantly worse vision after the operation.

Pregnant women advised against amalgam fillings: Britain's chief dental officer has advised pregnant women not to have or to have removed amalgam tooth fillings because of the risk that vapour from mercury, used in the fillings, could damage the unborn child.

Sales of knives to young people in New South Wales penalised: Anyone selling a knife to someone aged under 16 is to be fined a maximum of \$A5500 (£3600) in New South Wales. Those found carrying a knife in a public place or at school will be fined \$A550.

Reform of the WHO depends on next week's vital budget debate

Fiona Godlee, *BMJ*

As the World Health Organisation prepares to celebrate its 50th birthday, one woman looks set to prove that you can teach an old dog new tricks. According to commentators in Geneva, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, due to be confirmed next week as the WHO's new director general, has already transformed the atmosphere of the organisation. But how much she can achieve in her first term could depend on the outcome of a debate about the budget at next week's meeting of the World Health Assembly.

Soon after her nomination by WHO's executive board in January, Dr Brundtland commissioned a five person "transition team" to coordinate analyses of WHO's activities, structure, and processes. Based in Geneva, the team is funded by the Norwegian government and led by Jonas Store, a senior Norwegian diplomat.

Eleven satellite groups, each headed by external experts, are drafting detailed analyses on key issues. The transition team will report to Dr Brundtland over the next three months, and it will cease functioning when Dr Brundtland takes office on July 21.

Areas being investigated by satellite groups include staffing, communications, how to develop more effective relations between the secretariat (the director general and her staff) and other key players (the executive board, the assembly, donors, non-governmental organisations, and other UN agencies), and how to place health at the centre of the development agenda—as a vital ingredient of successful development rather than just one result of it. The transition team has also targeted some specific issues for analysis by satellite groups—malaria, tobacco, and mental health. Speaking for the team, Ann Kern explained that these would act as test beds for integrated approaches to improving health and building national capacity.

But the most important issue, according to commentators in Geneva, is the budget. Changes in the allocation of WHO's limited resources will, they say, be vital if Dr Brundtland is to make a significant impact on the way WHO works. In a crucial debate at next week's meeting, the assembly will consider a recommendation from the executive board to scrap its traditional

method of budgetary allocation, which is based largely on historical precedent, and move to a needs based approach. If adopted, the change will mean big gains for Europe and Africa, and big losses for South East Asia and the Western Pacific (see p 1403).

Not everyone is happy about the proposal. Japan, one of the most influential countries in WHO's Western Pacific region, is understood to have prepared an alternative proposal for presentation during the debate. This would limit the budgetary changes to the 60% of the regional funds that regions are supposed to allocate directly to individual countries, protecting for the time being the funding for regional offices.

But whatever the assembly decides, Dr Brundtland can do little to alter the budget for the next biennium (1998-9) since this has already been passed by the assembly. Much of the preparatory work has also already been done on the budget for 2000-1. The budget and finance satellite group has been charged with exploring how much room remains for manoeuvre during Dr Brundtland's first five year term. Insiders suggest that this will greatly depend on how much influence she can bring to bear on the regional directors.

Reaction to Dr Brundtland's initiative has been largely favourable. Most commentators have praised the way she has managed to stimulate analysis of the organisation while keeping her distance. "We are mainly relieved to be at the end of a 10 year nightmare," said one director. "The confusion and low morale meant everyone was fighting for themselves and things were hopelessly fragmented. We are now looking forward to some clear policy objectives and cohesion." □



Dr Brundtland is already making changes at the WHO

Corrections

Left hemisphere of the brain is underactive in dyslexic people

An error occurred in the first sentence of this article (18 April, p 1189). Broca's area is responsible for the production of sound patterns of speech and Wernicke's area for the perception (not the other way round).

German doctors vote to prescribe heroin to misusers

An error occurred in the last sentence of the third paragraph (4 April, p 1038). The 1000 heroin misusers in the project were aged 20 or older.