

In brief

Licence needed to sell tobacco in Singapore: From 1 September all shops selling cigarettes in Singapore need to be licensed. A one year licence costs £63 (\$100), and the fine for selling cigarettes without a licence is £713 (\$1140). The new law also requires retailers to verify the age of a buyer before making a sale, prevents the employment of sales assistants aged under 18, and prohibits the sale of individual cigarettes. Any breach of the legislation can result in the licence being revoked.

Canadian hospital agrees to investigation: Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children has bowed to pressure from its researchers and agreed to conduct a full scale investigation into the dispute between Dr Nancy Olivieri and the drug company that had sponsored the clinical trials she was working on. Dr Olivieri had decided to go public with her concerns about the safety of a drug used to treat a rare blood disorder, and the hospital had refused to support her (5 September, p 618).

PFI deals should be rigorously assessed: An Audit Commission report emphasises the need for all public authorities to ensure that decisions to enter schemes in the private finance initiative are based on a rigorous evaluation of financial risks and service improvements.

Doctor released from Israeli prison: Professor Abraham Marcus Klingberg, a physician and epidemiologist who supplied secret information to the Soviet KGB for 20 years, has finally been released from an Israeli prison after nearly 16 years of imprisonment.

Correction

Irish doctors warned about "millennium bug": The Medical Protection Society has pointed out that if patients suffer harm because of the computer millennium bug (22 August, p 490) members will be able to seek help in pursuing claims against suppliers and in meeting costs of claims provided that they have taken all reasonable precautions to avoid problems relating to the millennium bug.

Aricept advertisement breached code

Jacqui Wise, *BMJ*

An advertisement for donepezil (Aricept) breached the advertising code of practice and did not give a balanced view of the data, the Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority has ruled.

The advertisement, which was published in the *BMJ* and other medical journals, was headed "Mum has Alzheimer's," beneath which was a large coloured photograph of an elderly woman and her daughter, both smiling. Partially superimposed on the top right hand corner of this photograph was a much smaller photograph of the daughter looking worried. Beneath the larger photograph was the caption, which ran on from the main

heading, "but she knew I was calling today."

Dr Trisha Greenhalgh, a London GP, wrote a letter published in the *BMJ* that the advertisement "is a powerful claim for efficacy in a condition currently believed to be incurable and relentlessly progressive" (13 December 1997, p 1623). Referring to the published trial cited in the advertisement, she said that it was highly likely that the differences attributed to the intervention could have arisen by chance. Dr Greenhalgh's complaint, along with a similar complaint from another GP, was then taken up by the panel.

The panel ruled that the code had not been breached but later reversed that decision on appeal. The appeal board decided that the advertisement gave the impression that the patient's memory improved after treatment with donepezil. The panel said: "There were insufficient data to support the impression given by the advertisement that

memory in particular improved following treatment with Aricept. The advertising was not a balanced view of the data."

Dr Greenhalgh said: "Of all health professionals, GPs are probably best placed to gauge the hopes and fears of their patients. Carers of elderly demented patients clutch at straws, and there is a heavy pressure to offer a 'wonder drug' to demonstrate empathy and be seen to be doing something active. Misleading claims of efficacy are hard to prove, and GPs are often underconfident in challenging advertisements that appear to be scientifically based."

She added that making a complaint about an advertisement is straightforward as you don't need to make the scientific case against the advertisement yourself but simply need to say that the advertisement looks as if it might be unsound—for example, because it is misleading, incomplete, or offensive. □

Israel adopts tough laws on rabies

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich, *Jerusalem*

Israel will soon become the first country in the world to require all pet dogs and cats to have an identifying microchip inserted under their skin and to be vaccinated against rabies.

The new rules, approved by the economics committee of the Knesset, was welcomed by veterinarians but disappointed animal welfare groups. Professor Shimshony, chief veterinarian at the Agriculture Ministry, said that the new rules will save many people from having to be vaccinated against rabies needlessly.

A national effort to combat rabies was launched last January after the deaths from rabies of a 7 year old Arab girl from a Galilee village and a 21 year old soldier who was bitten by an unidentified rodent while sleeping in a tent. These tragedies caused public panic, and in 1997 alone, 5000 Israelis who had been bitten or scratched by various types of mammals were vaccinated against rabies at state expense—compared with 30 000 in the whole of Europe. So far this year, there have been eight cases of proved rabies in dogs and three in cats.

Nearly 90 000 dogs in Israel have already had an identifying microchip inserted as a result of municipal bylaws in about 50 or 60 local authorities. The new laws will make this mandatory for pet dogs in the whole country, and as a one year experiment for cats (except for those that never leave home). The cost of inserting the chip will be about £11 (\$17), including the licence fee, plus an additional £4 for the rabies vaccine. The price will be halved if

the animal is neutered. The identifying chip with the name and identity card number of the owner will allow vets to find out from a database whether a wandering animal has been vaccinated and has a history of biting.

Animal welfare groups were not pleased by the microchip regulation but favoured the idea of universal vaccination. Rivi Mayer of the Cat Welfare Association, said that the cost would be prohibitive. Etti Altman of the Let the Animals Live organisation said that she feared that government veterinarians would kill any stray animals found not to have a chip. □



Dogs in Israel must now be vaccinated against rabies

H. HORNSTEIN/PHOTONICA