

doctors. They've all circled their wagons" (*Canadian Medical Association Journal* 2001;165:1242).

The inquest and Professor Thomas's report relate to the deaths of 12 infants who died after paediatric cardiac surgery in 1994 at the Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre. Mortality was 29% among high risk cases compared with a norm of 11%.

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

Couple has the right to refuse test on newborn child

The Irish Supreme Court has supported the rights of a couple who refused to allow doctors to carry out a screening test on their newborn baby.

It rejected a challenge from one of the country's health boards to the refusal of a couple to allow a phenylketonuria (PKU) screening test to be carried out on their infant son.

The court said the North Western Health Board (NWHB) was effectively seeking to have the test made compulsory. That, said Ms Justice Denham, would have "a far-reaching" effect, turning into law something which was presently only departmental policy and would also establish "a very low threshold" for court intervention in future cases involving children.

Mr Justice Hardiman, calling the case "utterly novel," said the move to perform a treatment without consent was "a trespass, a battery and a breach of constitutional rights."

Doug Payne *Dublin*

India ups the stakes in the fight against tobacco

In a major boost to the anti-tobacco movement, India's Supreme Court has banned smoking in public places.

The court directed central and state governments as well as police commissioners to take effective steps to enforce the ban in public places, especially auditoriums, hospitals, schools, libraries, court buildings, public offices, and public transport.

A comprehensive bill against tobacco use is still pending before a select committee of India's parliament. Meanwhile, several states, such as Goa and Rajasthan, have already passed legislation against smoking.

India is the third largest producer and consumer of tobacco in the world. Survey data from the early 1990s showed that 43% of rural and 28% of urban Indian males used tobacco in various ways, such as smoking or chewing it or taking it as snuff.

Rohit Sharma *Mumbai*

GPs need more training in cancer genetics

General practitioners need more education to help them to make risk assessments of patients with a family history of breast or ovarian cancer.

Researchers who questioned a group of GPs found that only 1 in 4 knew the three most important criteria for risk assessment.

In the study, researchers from the department of primary health care at Oxford University sent a questionnaire to 282 GP principals asking them to make decisions on six simulated cases of women presenting with a family history of breast or ovarian cancer.

The aim of the study, reported in the journal *Family Practice* (2001;18:487-90), was to examine GPs' ability to assess risk and to make appropriate decisions on referrals.

Across the six family histories, the percentage of GPs making an appropriate risk assessment ranged from 21% to 63%.

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Correction

Abortion clinics fail to meet standards

In this news article by Zosia Kmietowicz (10 November, p 1088), we said that only 34% of abortion clinics in a recent survey met certain standards laid down by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. The story should have said that 34% failed to meet the targets. We apologise for the error.

US government moves against doctor assisted suicide

Fred Charatan *Florida*

The US attorney general, John Ashcroft, has authorised the Drug Enforcement Administration to take action against any doctor who prescribes lethal drugs for terminally ill patients, even though doctor assisted suicide is legal in one of the country's states.

In Oregon, people are allowed to kill themselves with a doctor's prescription. Under the state's Death with Dignity Act (1997), twice approved by its voters, a terminally ill patient may take lethal drugs if two doctors agree that the person has less than six months to live and is mentally competent to make the decision to end his or her life.

Reversing the position of the Clinton administration, Mr Ashcroft said that assisted suicide is not "a legitimate medical purpose" for prescribing or handing out drugs. Even if a doctor acts under Oregon law, he could have his licence to prescribe controlled substances revoked.

But in a letter to Dr Hugh Stelson, president of the 6500 member Oregon Medical Association, Mr Ashcroft wrote that in no way was his effort to stop legal use of controlled substances to assist suicide an attempt to stop doctors from prescribing controlled substances to alleviate pain.

He also said that this judgment would not lead to an increase in scrutiny of doctors' prescribing of controlled substances for the treatment of pain.

"They've tossed the ballots of Oregon voters in the trash can," said US senator Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat. "They're frustrated by the inconvenience of the democratic process. That's what Mr Ashcroft's action is all about today."

Mr Ashcroft's most prominent supporter in Oregon is Republican senator Gordon Smith, who faces re-election next year. Senator Smith said, "For me, it's an issue of principle upon which I'm prepared to stake my political career."

Two days after Mr Ashcroft's move, a federal judge in a US district court in Portland granted a temporary restraining order, sought by the Oregon attorney general, Hardy Myers, and several terminally ill people.

Mr Ashcroft's decision was criticised by Dr Jerome Groopman, professor of medicine at Harvard, in an article in the *New York Times*. He thought that a federal drug agency could not readily discern the "important medical, ethical, and legal distinctions between intentionally causing a patient's death and providing sufficient dosages of pain medication necessary to eliminate or alleviate pain" (2001;Nov 9:A27).

"In fact, it is medically impossible to dissociate intentionally ameliorating a dying patient's agony from intentionally shortening the time left to live," he added. □



Cancer patient Richard Holmes is angry with US attorney general, John Ashcroft, for blocking Oregon's assisted suicide law

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