

In brief

US government watchdog

criticises FDA: The Government Accountability Office, an independent arm of the US Congress, has criticised the Food and Drug Administration's failure to monitor drugs once they are on the market. (See www.gao.gov.)

Good timekeeping is the route to exam success:

Researchers correlated the time of arrival for four clinical courses run by the Royal College of Physicians against membership exam results (*Medical Teacher* 2006;28:40-2). They showed that those who passed (81 doctors or 53%) arrived for the course at a mean time of 8.14 am, but the 71 doctors who failed arrived, on average, six minutes later.

Caged psychiatric patient dies:

A 30 year old patient died while being restrained in a caged bed at Prague's Bohnice psychiatric hospital after choking on her own faeces. Harry Potter author J K Rowling has campaigned to have caged beds banned in the Czech Republic. The health ministry last October ordered metal caged beds to be removed immediately.

French pharmacy under

investigation after death: One person died and 16 people were taken to hospital, five needing intensive care, after taking weight loss pills containing thyroid extracts prepared at a pharmacy in Paris. The police closed the pharmacy on 25 April.

Gene therapy patient dies:

A 28 year old man, who had been successfully treated with gene therapy for an otherwise untreatable immune system deficiency (*BMJ* 2006;332:812, 8 Apr), has died of sepsis, doctors from a Düsseldorf hospital have confirmed.

Waits for heart treatment fall:

The time spent by cardiac patients in England in hospital waiting for treatment has dropped substantially, says a study from the NHS Heart Improvement Programme. The mean wait from first admission to hospital to the time of procedure for all patients has dropped from 11.66 days in April 2004 to 6.40 days in October 2005.

GPs can shape services by bidding for provider contracts

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

GPs need to get to grips with the ins and outs of alternative provider medical services (APMS)—a new type of contract for providing primary care services—if they are to compete with private enterprise and shape the future of community health services, says the BMA.

The new contractual arrangement was first outlined in the NHS Improvement Plan in June 2004. It allows primary care trusts to commission medical services from the independent sector, voluntary sector, not for profit organisations, NHS trusts, other primary care trusts, and foundation trusts. They can also commission services from doctors who are on the more traditional contracts for general medical services or personal medical services.

The new alternative provider contract aims to encourage GPs to cover areas in which it has proved difficult to recruit doctors or in which new forms of provision may be needed, such as surgeries offered in the late evening to meet the needs of

commuters. Another objective is to improve standards and efficiency in primary care by increasing competition.

But the scheme has already encountered difficulties. United Health Europe, a subsidiary of the US based United Health Group, recently won a bid to run a general practice in Derbyshire. But the award is currently being investigated after a resident challenged its legality (*BMJ* 2006;332:684).

In guidance on the new system, which aims to ensure that GPs and commercial businesses have an equal chance when bidding for the new contracts, the BMA says, "While there are many legitimate concerns about APMS, this method of contracting, if fairly implemented, does offer GPs the potential to further shape primary healthcare provision."

The BMA's guidance provides factual background on the alternative provider contract and suggests ways in which GPs can tender for such contracts and work collaboratively to make a bid to take over other practices.

Hamish Meldrum, the chair-

man of the BMA's General Practitioners Committee, said, "Along with traditional GP providers of general practice, APMS contracts are open to bids by commercial profit making companies."

"Our view is that there must always be a level playing field in the bidding process. We don't know the extent to which APMS will change primary care, but family doctors need to know all about it both in terms of bidding for these contracts and from the point of view of future working for APMS bodies."

The alternative provider contract is part of a package of reforms introduced by the government to diversify healthcare providers in the NHS and increase competition and patient choice.

The guidance highlights concerns that the new contract will increase the fragmentation of general practice and threaten continuity of care. It also worries that operating under the "commercial takeover" model may give large independent companies an inbuilt advantage or that they may be given one by commissioning primary care trusts.

Alternative Provider Medical Services (APMS): Guidance for GPs is available at www.bma.org.uk.

Concordia Health wins south London contract for primary care

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Contracts for running three GP practices that have been run directly by the local primary care trust have been awarded to new operators. Southwark Health and Social Care Board has awarded contracts for the management of the medical centres at Melbourne Grove, Parkside, and Sternhall Lane, all in south London. The new regimes are expected to take over within the next three months.

The contracts for the management of the Melbourne Grove practice in Dulwich and Parkside in Camberwell have been awarded to Concordia



Dr John Chisholm's company has been awarded a contract to run GP services

Health, an organisation led by GPs John Chisholm and Simon Fradd together with NHS specialist lawyer Andrew Lockhart-Mirams. The Sternhall Lane contract in Peckham has been awarded to the Hurley Group, a GP partnership in Lambeth.

"I am delighted that current

and future patients of these practices are set to benefit from the experience, skills, and energy of new managers who can build on what has been achieved over the past two years and develop them into truly excellent practices," said Chris Bull, Southwark Primary Care Trust's chief executive.

Southwark Primary Care Trust awarded the contracts after an open competitive tender process. Contracts, which will be for a yet to be determined time, are currently being finalised with a start date within the next three months.

Staff currently working at the three practices will be transferred to the new management, and it is expected that patients will continue to be seen by the same doctors and nurses.

Dr Chisholm, a former chairman of the BMA's General Practitioners Committee, and Dr Fradd both had key roles in negotiating the new General Medical Services contract. □