

## UK strategy to cut antibiotic use outlined

Alex Brooks, *BMJ*

Patients should not be prescribed antibiotics for simple coughs and colds or for viral sore throats, recommends a report published last week by the UK Standing Medical Advisory Committee.

The report also advises that women with uncomplicated cystitis should be given only a three day course of treatment and that telephone prescription of antibiotics should occur only in "exceptional cases."

Sir Kenneth Calman, chief medical officer for England, said that the report was a response to growing national and international concern about the increasing resistance of micro-organisms to antibiotics. Chief medical officers from all over Europe are

meeting this week in Copenhagen to draw up recommendations on tackling the issue.

Sir Kenneth said that antibiotics should be used "prudently and appropriately" to "prevent, delay, and control" increasing resistance. Up to 75% of antibiotic use is of "questionable therapeutic value," according to an editorial in last week's *BMJ* (1998;317:609-10).

The committee's report calls for a national campaign to increase understanding of the issue both among health professionals and the public. Dr Judy Gilley, a London GP and member of the committee, said that some patients regarded antibiotics as a "rapid route back to school or work" and "doctors could only cope with a certain amount of distress before they collude."

Guidelines for prescription are being incorporated into computerised decision making support systems to help GPs, who prescribe most of the oral antimicrobial agents used in



Antibiotics should not be prescribed for viral sore throats

Britain. The report suggests that similar systems should be developed for use in hospitals using local antimicrobial sensitivity profiles. These would then contribute to regional and national surveillance databases. A national surveillance system is also being discussed. □

*The Path of Least Resistance* is on the internet ([www.open.gov.uk/doh/cmo/cmoh.htm](http://www.open.gov.uk/doh/cmo/cmoh.htm)).

## Liberals propose new health forum

John Warden,  
*parliamentary correspondent, BMJ*

Britain's Liberal Democrats, at their Brighton conference on 22 September, will suggest how to take discussion of the NHS away from party politics and the "hotbed of parliament."

In a new policy document, *Moving Ahead*, they propose a standing conference on the future of health and social care, which would act as a public forum to examine the issue of what services the NHS should provide and the impact on users.

The conference would shape the future of the NHS by reviewing its priorities on a regular basis, including the difficult question of rationing, and would publish recommendations. The document favours criteria used in the Netherlands as a model for excluding some services from health care provision. These criteria ask whether the service or treatment is necessary from the community's point of view, whether it is effective and efficient, and whether it could be left to personal responsibility.

A national inspectorate would ensure national standards across services and providers, including the private sector. Operational independence for chief medical officers would make them effective public health watchdogs.

Liberal Democrats believe in merging health authorities in England with social service departments in a reformed structure of local government to make the commissioning of services accountable to local people. They believe that Labour's proposed primary care groups will lead to inefficiencies, with more money being diverted into bureaucracy.

Hospital waiting lists would be replaced with a diary system based on clinical need and convenience for patients, and guaranteeing that in time no patient would wait more than six months for an operation.

Prescription charges would be frozen, and a health levy on the tobacco industry considered, the document states. □

## Psychiatrist is investigated by GMC

Norman Swan, *Sydney*

A psychiatrist who has been struck off medical registers in both Canada and Australia is now under investigation by the General Medical Council in Britain. The case has highlighted the fact that different registration bodies have no formal mechanism for sharing information about doctors who have been excluded from practice.

The GMC investigation is believed to be in part related to the distribution in Britain of a forged letter from the South African Medical and Dental Council falsely claiming that a leading Australian researcher had been deregistered for narcotics trafficking.

The saga of Dr Ashoka Prasad goes back at least 11 years and involves dead professors who write letters, non-existent universities, and the Nobel peace prize. Dr Prasad arrived in Melbourne in 1987 to work for the Victorian Health Department and part time at the Mental Health Research Institute, headed by Professor David Copolov.

Problems arose with a study that Dr Prasad was supposedly

conducting into the season of birth of people with schizophrenia. A prompt independent inquiry, chaired by Professor John Funder, concluded that Dr Prasad had fabricated the data, did not have the PhD that was on his curriculum vitae or the DSc from the University of Romande in Zug, Switzerland, which in fact was a "degree for sale" university in Sudbury, England. The Medical Practitioners' Board of Victoria held its own hearings and deregistered Dr Prasad, who by that time had left Australia.

There was then some correspondence to the *BMJ*, which included a letter from a professor at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, where Dr Prasad was working. It said that the university had exonerated Dr Prasad, but the letter was never published as it transpired that the professor had been dead for several months before the date on the letter.

In April 1990, Dr Prasad's name was erased from the register in British Columbia after he claimed that he had been nominated for the Nobel peace prize.

Four years later, forged official documents arrived at the Victorian Medical Board from India accusing Professors Copolov and Funder of narcotics trafficking.

Last year, while Dr Prasad was a locum consultant in Wolverhampton, Professor Eve Johnstone at the University of Edinburgh and Professor Ian Brockington at Birmingham were each sent a letter on paper with the South African Medical and Dental Council's letterhead, which said that Professor Copolov had been struck off the South African medical register for narcotics trafficking. This was a baseless forgery, and although it is not known who carried it out, the letters arrived in a handwritten envelope with a Wolverhampton postmark. According to Professor Brockington, the writing bore a resemblance to that of Dr Prasad.

Whatever might be the reason for Dr Prasad's behaviour and the result of the GMC inquiry, the president of the Medical Practitioners Board of Victoria, Dr Kerry Breen, has expressed concern that medical registration bodies around the world have no formal mechanism for sharing information about doctors who have been excluded from practice. □