

## In brief

**WHO investigates SARS outbreak in China:** The World Health Organization has begun an investigation at the Beijing virology laboratory that is believed to be the source of the latest outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome. WHO has urged the Chinese authorities to overhaul safety procedures.

**UK government appoints pathology adviser:** Dr Ian Barnes, head of pathology at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust since 1998, has been appointed as the government's first national pathology adviser, to champion modernisation of pathology across the country.

**BMJ columnist wins award:** *BMJ* Soundings writer and Northern Ireland GP Liam Farrell has been named as "health journalist 2003 in the medical media—opinion category" in this year's GlaxoSmithKline Irish medical media awards. The judges praised "the originality and quirky wit with which he has illustrated his many columns" in the *BMJ* and in *GP* magazine.

**Dutch group calls for increase in Down's syndrome screening:** The Dutch government should scrap its age limit of 36 years before routinely offering pregnant women tests for Down's syndrome, say its scientific advisers on the Dutch Health Council, which reports that improved testing for risk—combining a blood test and nuchal translucency measurement by ultrasonography—removes, in scientific terms, any advantages to having an age limit.

**GMC fights off High Court challenge:** The General Medical Council last week saw off a challenge in the High Court by the new Council for the Regulation of Healthcare Professionals to a three month suspension imposed on a GP who falsified his curriculum vitae and had a sexual relationship with a woman patient. Mr Justice Leveson ruled that the GMC acted "appropriately and sensibly" in imposing the penalty on Olagbalekan Solanke. The new watchdog has challenged the GMC's actions in six cases in four months.

## Doctors charged with planning to kill a patient for his kidneys

Andrew Osborn *Moscow*

Four Moscow doctors have been accused of plotting to murder a patient for his kidneys so that they could use them for lucrative and possibly illegal transplantations.

The case has raised fears that doctors across Russia are engaging in such practices.

The four doctors—Irina Lirtsman, Lyubov Pravdenko, Pyotr Pyatnichuk, and Bairma Shagdurnova—all worked in Moscow City Hospital No 20.

Dr Lirtsman was deputy head of the intensive care unit, Dr Pravdenko a doctor in the unit, and the two men were both transplant surgeons.

The charges relate to a patient who was brought into the hospital on 11 April last year.

The 50 year old man, identified in legal documents as

A Orekhov, had been in a car crash and had sustained extremely serious head injuries, including brain and skull damage.

The accused doctors say his case was hopeless and that he subsequently had three separate heart attacks and that they had only just managed to revive him.

They also claim that he was in fact clinically dead when a decision to take his organs was made.

The prosecutors beg to differ. They say the police caught the doctors "red handed" about to remove the patient's kidneys while he was still alive.

The police entered the operating theatre as the first incisions were about to be made. The man's hands were tied behind his head, his chest was smeared

with antiseptic ointment, the theatre lamp was illuminated, and the surgical tools were at hand.

Police doctors quickly checked and confirmed that Mr Orekhov's heart was still beating and that his blood pressure was stable.

They say he should have been in the resuscitation room, not in the transplantation theatre. He died several hours later.

Under Russian law patients must be declared "biologically dead" before their organs can be removed, and at least two doctors need to sign a document testifying to that fact.

But in this case, the prosecutors said, there was no such document.

It was not by chance that the police happened to burst into the operating theatre. A "concerned citizen" had tipped them off at the beginning of the year after she arrived at a city hospital to find that her friend had been "cut open" for his organs after an accident. The police then mounted an extensive surveillance operation. □

## Half of Russia's doctors face sack in healthcare reforms

Andrew Osborn *Moscow*

Russia is to undertake a root and branch reform of its creaking Soviet-era healthcare system that could see half the country's medical professionals given the sack.

Russia's health service has not been seriously reformed since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and it now has severe funding shortages. It is also, according to Western experts, seriously overstaffed.

Although healthcare is universal and theoretically free at the point of delivery, its quality is infamously poor, and many Russians are forced to pay under the counter bribes to get the medicine or treatment they want.

A bill drafted by Vladimir Putin's government seeks to change all that. It aims to shift the emphasis on to quality of treatment in an attempt to get away from the Soviet obsession with patient quotas.

Although the bill is at an early stage and is likely to be extensively amended in the country's *duma* (parliament) its main elements, which are extremely radical, seem likely to be retained.

If the bill is enacted, the Russian media claim some 300 000 doctors and health workers (about half the current total) would be laid off and scores of hospitals shut down in the next few years.

The legislation also envisages scrapping a third of Russia's 1.6 million hospital beds in the next decade and doing away with tens of thousands of local specialist

posts. The idea is to move away from specialisation and encourage more doctors to become GPs.

The government also wants doctors to raise the threshold for admitting patients to hospital and to get people in and out of hospitals much quicker.

Rural Russia would be worst affected, with small local practices abolished in favour of larger outpatient services in bigger settlements.

Some Russian MPs have criticised the draft bill for being too vague. They say it is "chaotic and lacks clear goals." □



Vladimir Putin wants to reform the bloated bureaucracy of Russia's healthcare system