In brief

Hepatitis C campaign launched: The first phase of a new hepatitis C awareness campaign—FaCe It—has been unveiled by the Department of Health alongside the launch of a comprehensive Hepatitis C Action Plan for England to improve the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of hepatitis C. See www.dh.gov.uk/publications

Hong Kong to reduce mosquitoes carrying dengue: The Hong Kong government has launched a mosquito reduction exercise as the number of mosquitoes carrying dengue has rocketed to a four year high at the same time as 14 cases of imported dengue have occurred in the city, raising the risk of a major outbreak of dengue fever there. The World Health Organization has also warned that the area where dengue fever is endemic in Asia is widening to include parts of the Philippines, Indonesia, Laos, and Cambodia.

Archive of medical journals to go online: The Wellcome Trust, in partnership with the Joint Information Systems Committee, and the US National Library of Medicine are joining forces to digitise a complete archive of medical journals, including the *BMJ*, some dating back more than 125 years. The digitised content will be made freely available at www.pubmedcentral.gov

WHO issues guidelines on alternative medicine: The World Health Organization has issued guidelines for national health authorities to advise consumers on using alternative medicines. The move comes after studies showed that adverse reactions to traditional, complementary, and alternative medicines had more than doubled in the past three years. See www.who.int/medicines/library/trm/consumer.pdf

Cactus eases hangover sting: Taking prickly pear extract before a drinking binge reduces hangover symptoms, Tulane University researchers report in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* (2004;164:1334-40). C reactive protein levels were highest in drinkers who felt worst the next day, and 40% lower in those given the *Opuntia ficus indica* extract.

Drug marketing practices come under scrutiny

Fred Charatan *Florida*

Federal prosecutors have issued subpoenas to several drug makers, including Johnson and Johnson, Wyeth, and Bristol-Myers Squibb, as part of an investigation from Boston, Massachusetts, into a pattern of financial incentives that the major drug makers have used to persuade doctors to favour their drugs.

The action comes after a number of doctors revealed the ploys allegedly adopted by the various companies.

One doctor—who wishes to remain anonymous because he wants to avoid involvement in a federal probe of major drug companies—said he threw away an unsolicited cheque for $10 000 (£5500; €8200) from Schering-Plough. The doctor said the cheque arrived in the mail from the company in exchange for an attached "consulting" agreement that required the doctor's commitment to prescribe the company's products.

Schering-Plough paid doctors between $1000 and $1500 for each patient for prescribing its drug Intron A (interferon alfa-2b, recombinant) for hepatitis C. A one month course of treatment of the drug costs approximately $500. In return for the payments doctors were expected to collect data on their patients' progress.

Six specialists in liver disease said Schering-Plough paid "consulting fees" to doctors to keep them loyal to the company's products. The letter accompanying a cheque for $10 000 explained that the money was for consulting services that were detailed on an accompanying "Schedule A," said a doctor who also insisted on anonymity. But when the doctor turned to the attached sheet, he said, "Schedule A" were the only words printed on an otherwise blank sheet of paper.

Two top executives at Schering declined to comment, but Fred Hassan, chief executive officer since April 2003, said Schering has overhauled its marketing to eliminate inducements.

Experts on the drug industry say the federal enquiries into Schering-Plough and other big drug makers have led some companies to adopt major changes in the way they market drugs to doctors. □

National Institutes of Health criticised for not preventing conflicts of interest

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) has been criticised by members of Congress for letting employees accept lucrative consultancy assignments from drug and biotechnology companies.

On 22 June the director of the NIH, Dr Elias Zerhouni, told the House Energy and Commerce Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, "In retrospect, there was not a sufficient safeguard against the perception of conflict of interest." He said the NIH would tighten rules about employees' consultancy work.

The NIH's troubles began on 7 December 2003. In a front page article the *Los Angeles Times* described how a small number of the institutes' 17 000 employees had received millions of dollars of income from outside sources since 1995 (2003 December 7;sect A:1).

That in itself was not illegal, although the public and even many senators and representatives were probably unaware of the practice.

Restrictions on outside work by NIH employees were loosened in 1995 by Dr Harold Varmus, the Nobel prize winner who headed the organisation at the time, in an effort to recruit leading scientists who could earn much more at universities. In his testimony on 22 June Dr Zerhouni outlined what he described as "a major reform" since then.

"We are severely restricting the ability of NIH employees to consult with industry," he said. He suggested prohibiting holding stock in biotechnology or drug companies, consulting by senior staff and staff who award research grants, and receiving stock as payment or holding stock in drug or biotechnology companies, limiting outside work to 400 hours a year, and limiting payment to 25% of salary—as well as random audits to detect unreported outside work. He also called for more public financial disclosures by employees.

However, the *Washington Post* (2004 June 23;sect A:19) reported that one researcher at the National Cancer Institute continued to receive consultancy fees, although he testified that he had suspended the agreement. It also reported that the blue ribbon committee had turned up about 100 consultancy arrangements that NIH officials didn't know about. A neurologist at the National Institute of Mental Health, Dr Trey Sunderland, had received more than $500 000 (£273 250; €410 340) over the past five years in fees, honorariums, and expense repayments from Pfizer, but the amounts had not been reported.

The *Wall Street Journal* (2004 June 22;sect A:4) reported that the investigation into conflicts of interest is being expanded to 15 other federal agencies. □

NIH

Dr Elias Zerhouni admitted that safeguards were inadequate