

In brief

More women are going to chemists for emergency contraceptive: The proportion of British women getting the emergency contraceptive from pharmacies rather than from other sources has almost doubled, from 27% in 2003-4 to 50% in 2004-5, the Office for National Statistics reports. *Contraception and Sexual Health, 2004/5* is at www.statistics.gov.uk.

Bill Gates donates £28m to malaria research: Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates is to donate £28m (\$50m; €41m) to a UK research centre in Liverpool that is looking at new ways to control the mosquitoes that spread malaria. It is part of a £145m gift to malaria research worldwide.

Difference in Gulf war veterans' mortality is insignificant: The mortality of UK veterans of the Gulf war does not differ significantly from mortality in military personnel who were not deployed to the Gulf, says a study funded by the Ministry of Defence and published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* (doi: 10.1093/ije/dyi205). Although they were twice as likely as other soldiers to die from a disease related to exposure to depleted uranium, the difference was not statistically significant.

Requests for NHS complaints review double: The number of people asking for an independent review of their NHS complaint has more than doubled in the past year, the Healthcare Commission says. It received more than 8000 requests from people wanting their complaint independently reviewed in the 12 months to August, which compares with 3700 requests in 2003-4.

Fruit and vegetables are offered on prescription: Doctors working in a deprived area of northwest England are issuing prescriptions that offer patients discounts on fruit and vegetables. Early feedback indicates that the intervention has had a significant effect, say the Liverpool University authors of a report in *Public Health* (2005;119:981-6).

Professors speak out against advertising directly to consumers

Jeanne Lenzer *New York*

The drug industry's "onslaught of advertising to promote prescription drugs... does not promote public health" and "increases costs and unnecessary prescriptions," more than 200 US medical school professors said last week. In the United States the industry spends \$4bn (£2.3bn; €3.3bn) a year on direct to consumer advertising.

The professors signed a petition organised by Commercial Alert, an Oregon based non-profit organisation that seeks to "protect communities from commercialism." The petition was sent to the US Food and Drug Administration in response to a call for public comments before an FDA advisory committee's hearing on direct to consumer advertising held earlier this week.


The professors say in the petition: "Prescription drug advertising pressures health professionals to prescribe particular medications, and often the ones that may be less effective and more expensive and dangerous. This intrudes on the relationship between medical professionals and patients, and disrupts the therapeutic process."

That, say the signatories, wastes valuable time as doctors are forced to "explain to patients why they may have been misled by the drug advertisements they have seen."

The doctors dismiss the idea that direct to consumer advertising is "educational," saying: "It [such advertising] is inherently misleading because it features emotive imagery and omits crucial information about drugs."

This, they say, is the result of an "inherent and irredeemable financial conflict-of-interest" of the drug companies, which drives them to "exaggerate the positive and minimize the negative qualities of their own products."

Jeff Trewhitt, a spokesman for Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, disagreed. "The data show a different story," he said, adding that direct to consumer advertising "is educational at a time when there is significant under-diagnosis and undertreatment of diseases that affect millions of Americans."

Mr Trewhitt said that a study by the US health think tank Rand Health published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* "found that nearly half of all adults in the United States fail to receive recommended health care." He said, "Medications were under-used in seven conditions, including asthma, congestive heart failure, diabetes, cerebrovascular disease, hyperlipidaemia, and hypertension." 

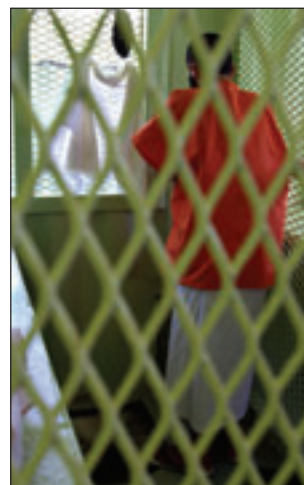
Lawyers gain access to Guantanamo medical records

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

A judge in the US Federal District Court, Gladys Kessler, ruled last week that the US government must provide some medical records to lawyers representing four Saudi prisoners who are being force fed at the US detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. But she denied a request that prisoners have telephone access to their lawyers and families.

The four prisoners began their hunger strike in August and are said to be in a critical condition. At present 24 prisoners are said to be on hunger strike (*BMJ* 2005;331:866, 15 Oct).

Judge Kessler, in Washington, DC, ordered the US government to give the lawyers at least 24 hours' notice of force feeding of their clients. It should also provide medical records for the week before the force feedings began and continue to provide



One prisoner had difficulties speaking because of throat damage from force feeding

medical records at least weekly until force feeding ends, she ruled.

Judge Kessler wrote, "The Supreme Court [of the United States] has granted Petitioners [the prisoners/detainees] the right to challenge their detentions... To do so in a meaningful way, they must have access to counsel and to the Court. Such access is particularly necessary where a detainee's life and health are in serious danger."

The lawyers from the New York firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, who are working pro bono, represent 10 prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, including the four Saudis said to be in critical condition. The lawyers are working with the non-profit Center for Constitutional Rights (www.ccr-ny.org), which represents many prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

The judge denied the lawyers' request that the prisoners be given telephone access to their lawyers, families, and close friends, because the logistics were too difficult.

Julia Tarver, a partner in the New York law firm, who visited Guantanamo Bay in September, said that one prisoner had become emaciated since her previous visit and had difficulty speaking because of lesions in his throat resulting from force feeding. This prisoner also said that nasogastric tubes were painful because insertion was done without any anaesthesia or sedative.

Dr John Edmondson, head of the Guantanamo Bay hospital, denied every one of the detainees' allegations. He said nasogastric tubes were inserted only by trained and experienced doctors. 