

In brief

BMA rejects contract proposal:

Representatives of doctors working in the staff and specialist associate grades, which are outside the normal career NHS posts, have rejected a new contract from NHS Employers, refusing even to ballot on it. The contract did not offer enough opportunity for developing skills, said the BMA committee dealing with the negotiations.

German insurers refuse cover:

Some drugs, including short acting insulin analogues for type 2 diabetes, will not be covered by German health insurance companies in future. They based their decision on the evidence of the Institute for Quality and Economic Efficiency in Health Care. The institute said that short acting insulin analogues are 30-60% dearer than human insulin.

Man is jailed for selling own kidney:

A Romanian man has been jailed for two years for organ smuggling after a routine medical check showed he was missing a kidney. Robert Mihaly, 30, from Cluj in western Romania, claimed it had been removed for medical reasons but later admitted he had sold it for more than £10 000 (€14 600; \$19 000) in 2001 to a Romanian woman acting for a foreign client.

Dutch heart centres will publish death rates:

Specialist centres of heart surgery in the Netherlands must publish quarterly mortality figures from 2007 if they are to avoid investigation by health inspectors. The new measures have been introduced after problems emerged with adult heart surgery at the St Radboud University Medical Centre, Nijmegen, only after an internal email was leaked (*BMJ* 2006;332:1049).

French surgeons strike:

French anaesthesiologists, surgeons, and obstetricians and gynaecologists in the private sector began an open ended strike on 24 July for higher fees and reduced insurance premiums. Planned six months ago, the strike began during a heatwave as hospitals overflowed with extra patients. Two thirds of France's 900 private clinics were affected.

Chief medical officer calls for rewards to improve clinical practice

Caroline White *London*

The chief medical officer for England, Liam Donaldson, has said that financial rewards and penalties could be introduced in a bid to root out unacceptable regional variations in clinical practice.

Professor Donaldson was speaking last week at the launch of the latest issue of his annual report on the state of public health, which draws on data for 2005 from the former 28 strategic health authorities.

He said that despite great improvements in medical education and the growth of an evidence base to inform practice "there is still far too much clinical variation" that cannot be justified by medical need and that is "not acceptable."

Not only do such discrepancies result in inappropriate care and health inequalities, they also expose patients to unnecessary risk and cost the NHS "billions" every year, he added, citing as one example the use of 574 dif-

ferent hip joint and socket combinations for broadly similar operations.

The report shows that inexplicably wide geographical variations exist in prescribing patterns, numbers of hysterectomies, treatment of coronary artery disease, and use of tonsil removal among children.

Numbers of hysterectomies for excessive menstrual bleeding among women aged between 40 and 59 years have fallen by 64% in North Central London strategic health authority but by only 15% in Northumberland, Tyne and Wear. Professor Donaldson said that if hysterectomies were performed more appropriately 6000 operations could be avoided and £15m (€22m; \$28m) saved.

Similarly about 8000 tonsillectomies are needlessly done—particularly among children from poorer families, among whom the procedure

is more common—at a cost of more than £6m.

Professor Donaldson said that better dissemination of the latest evidence under the new NHS information technology programme and guidance on ineffective interventions from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence would help narrow the gaps and ensure that all patients received the best available treatment.

But adjustments to the current tariff system, which would give incentives for effective practice and penalise its opposite, was another option, he said.

"It's possibly a win-win situation," he said, adding that serious discussions about it would be held over the next few weeks.

Paul Miller, chairman of the BMA's consultants' committee, said that such a scheme was "certainly achievable."

He said, "If you stop funding a hospital to do certain procedures it will stop doing them." But clearcut evidence for change was essential, he added. □

Annual Report 2005: The Chief Medical Officer on the State of Public Health is available at www.dh.gov.uk/cmo.

Bush vetoes bill to expand stem cell research

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

President Bush has blocked legislation passed by the US Congress that would have removed some restrictions on stem cell research.

It is the first time that the president has used his power of veto to scupper a bill. Several senior Republicans voted for more stem cell research, but neither the House of Representatives nor the Senate had enough votes to override the president's veto.

President Bush said, "If this bill would have become law, American tax payers would, for the first time in our history, be compelled to fund the deliberate destruction of human embryos. And I'm not going to allow it. I made it clear to Congress that I will not allow our nation to cross this moral line."

Although privately funded stem cell research is permitted, federally funded research is restricted to the 21 stem cells lines



President Bush holds a child born after embryo adoption

that were in existence on 9 August 2001, many of which are thought to be contaminated (*BMJ* 2005;330:214).

The bill would have allowed research on embryos that were left over after fertility treatment and donated by the couples involved. Fertility clinics in the United States have about 400 000 leftover frozen embryos.

Surveys indicate that most Americans support the use of embryos for stem cell research, and expanded stem cell research also has the backing of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, major newspapers, and important Republicans, such as Nancy

Reagan and the governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Governor Schwarzenegger immediately authorised a loan of \$150m (£80m; €120m) to his state's stem cell research institute.

President Bush announced his veto at a White House press conference, attended by families with babies who were created through "embryo adoption," in which leftover frozen embryos are donated to unrelated infertile couples.

"These boys and girls are not spare parts," said the president, hugging one of the children. "They remind us of that [which] is lost when embryos are destroyed in the name of research. They remind us that we all begin our lives as a small collection of cells. And they remind us that in our zeal for new treatments and cures America must never abandon our fundamental morals ... With the right techniques and the right policies we can achieve scientific progress while living up to our ethical responsibilities."

President Bush also approved a bill prohibiting "fetal farming," the creation of embryos for research or "to harvest their parts." □