

# bmj.com news roundup

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## NICE plans faster guidance on drugs for the NHS

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), the body that develops guidance on the use of treatments for the NHS in England and Wales, said last week that it is discussing proposals with the Department of Health to appraise new drugs and health technologies more rapidly.

The process that NICE uses now for technology appraisals of new or existing drugs has been criticised by patients' organisations as being too slow, typically taking 14-16 months (*BMJ* 2005; 331:652, 24 Sep).

The process starts with commissioning an independent academic centre to review and report on published evidence on the technology. Patients' groups, carers, healthcare professionals, and manufacturers of the drugs or devices are then invited to comment on the report.

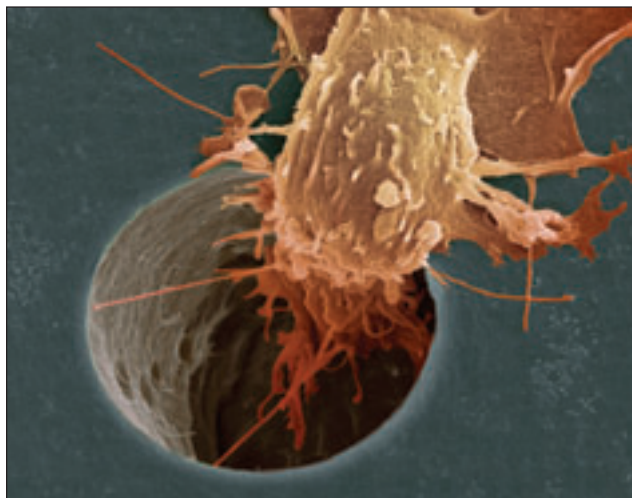
The assessment report and the comments are combined in an evaluation report, which is used by an independent appraisal committee to develop a consultation document that is circulated for comments to inform the final appraisal.

At a meeting last week NICE's board considered proposals on how to develop advice more rapidly on what it termed "important" new drugs and health technologies. It submitted the proposals to the health department.

Susan Mayor *London*

## European Commission aims to reduce deaths from air pollution

The European Commission has proposed a wide ranging, 15 year strategy to reduce the number of people who die prematurely because of air pollution. But it has had to water down its original proposals because of complaints from industry groups, and pressure groups say the present proposals do not go far enough.



*Cancer cells on the move*

The ability of cancer cells to move about is vividly illustrated in the photograph that won first place in the medicine and life category of the 2005 Visions of Science awards this week.

The photograph shows a skin cancer cell migrating across a matrix, with the cell caught moving through a pore in the material used for its culture. It was taken by Anne Weston, scientific officer in the electron microscopy department at the charity Cancer Research UK. She explained: "This cell was part of a sample in an ongoing project investigating tumour biology. We were fortunate enough to find the cell in the process of passing through a pore and thought that it nicely illustrated a cell in motion."

Susan Mayor *London*

More photographs from the competition can be found at [www.visions-of-science.co.uk](http://www.visions-of-science.co.uk).

The commission is looking to regulate, for the first time, people's exposure to fine airborne particulates which can penetrate deep into lungs, and ozone pollution at ground level. It aims to achieve this by introducing new standards on car emissions, setting ceilings on allowable concentrations of smog in Europe's cities, and by updating existing environmental legislation to increase its effectiveness.

The commission estimates that air pollution kills 370 000 people in Europe every year, reduces average life expectancy by up to nine months, and costs the EU economy between €427bn (£290bn; \$514bn) and €790 a year.

Reductions for fine dust and ground level ozone pollution had initially been to set at 80% over the next 15 years. But protests from industry led to targets of 75% for fine dust and 60% for ground level ozone.

Rory Watson *Brussels*

## UK charity did not break law in giving information about late abortions

A leading British provider of abortions did not break the law when it told women who wanted late terminations about a clinic in Spain that would perform them, a report by Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer for England, concluded last week.

Professor Donaldson investigated the charity the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) after a newspaper reported that it was illegally referring women to Spain for abortions after 24 weeks' gestation, the limit in Britain for abortions for "social" reasons.

Professor Donaldson has decided that BPAS did not break the law by telling women about the Spanish clinic. But he criticised it for giving out the clinic's

telephone number too readily.

A few days after Professor Donaldson's report was published an unnamed GP from the West Midlands was said to be under police investigation for taking her daughter to the same clinic for an abortion at 31 weeks. According to the story in the *Daily Mail* (Sep 24: 11) the mother and daughter were to learn this week whether they would face criminal charges, after being arrested last February on suspicion of conspiracy to commit child destruction.

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

## NHS trusts urge caution over BMA finance survey

The NHS Confederation, which represents NHS trusts and health authorities, has urged caution over the results of a BMA survey on NHS funding, which found that three quarters of trusts were in financial difficulty.

The survey claimed that most trusts faced funding shortfalls—but the confederation's policy director, Nigel Edwards, said the survey covered only a minority of trusts and, although not inaccurate, does not give a complete picture.

The BMA survey was sent to 530 medical directors, of whom only 120 responded. Half of those responding were from acute trusts and a quarter were from primary care trusts.

Of those who responded 73% said their trust was facing a funding shortfall in the current financial year. They predicted shortfalls ranging from £0.2m (\$0.4m; €0.3m) to £25m, and the average predicted shortfall was £6.2m.

A third of respondents reported that their trust was intending to reduce services as a result of a shortfall. This included staff redundancies, bed closures, and a freeze on recruitment.

One in seven respondents said medical staff posts would be included in recruitment freezes. Mr Edwards said the NHS Confederation was confident that any cost cutting measures would be done in a way that safeguarded the quality of frontline care.

Lynn Eaton *London*