

In brief

Elderly NHS patients may recuperate privately: The United Kingdom is expected to announce plans for elderly patients who occupy about 20% of acute NHS beds—at a cost of up to £1200 (\$1920) a week—to recuperate in private nursing homes. The private sector has about 25 000 spare private nursing home beds at any one time.

Hospital infections in Hungary cause 4000 deaths: The Hungarian Hospital Association is urging hospitals to spend more on hygiene after it found that 200 000 patients acquire an infection each year and 4000 of these die.

Many Poles have enlarged thyroids after Chernobyl accident: Up to 70% of the populations (of Kolno, Sejny, and Suwalki) in northeast Poland, the region hit hardest by the Chernobyl nuclear accident in April 1986, have enlarged thyroid glands, according to researchers at Poland's Bialystok Medical Academy. Thyroid changes were found in half the young women and in 10% of all young people in the region.

Scottish GP jailed for causing road death: Elizabeth Crabbie, aged 54, a partner at a Perth health centre, has been jailed for five years and banned from driving for 10 years after causing the death of another motorist when she was three times over the drink-drive alcohol limit.

Beer may protect against heart disease: A pint of beer may help to protect against heart disease more effectively than red wine or spirits, according to Dutch research published in the *Lancet* (2000; 355; 1522). Beer contains vitamin B-6, which prevents the build up of homocysteine, thought to be linked to an increase in the risk of heart disease.

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Cancer "tsar" invites ideas for modernisation

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

Professor Mike Richards, the national cancer director for England, has called on everyone involved in cancer care to help shape the future of services by suggesting ways to make progress on the modernisation agenda.

He told a meeting on cancer care in London last week that he had been given three months in which to hold dialogues about which aspects of cancer services should be addressed in the new national cancer programme, which is due to be published in the autumn.

He set two broad goals for the programme: to save lives through better detection, prevention, and treatment of cancer; and to improve the quality of life of patients by improving the care they experience, reducing delays, and improving outcomes. In addition, he aims to



Professor Mike Richards has three months for consultation

iron out the inequalities in the incidence and care of cancer that exist across the country.

"With the additional money that has been available to the NHS we have the opportunity to plan sustained growth in cancer services for at least the next four years," Professor Richards told the conference, which was organised by the Harrogate Management Centre.

Professor Richards has identified four areas of cancer care that are in need of review: the workforce; access to services; drugs; and supportive care services. Information strategies, standards of performance indicators, facilities, and streamlining of care are also priorities, he added.

Drugs had been unfairly subjected to rationing and cost effectiveness studies, Jim Carmichael, professor of clinical oncology at the University of Nottingham, told the conference. He said that the use of drugs such as paclitaxel (Taxol) and docetaxel (Taxotere)—currently being evaluated by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to see whether they should be routinely available on the NHS—is restricted because they are visible and easy to target. New surgical and radiological techniques go unchecked, however, and creep into everyday practice "through the back door," despite the fact that they too can be costly.

The next few years will see an explosion of new drugs for treating cancer, and they will all need to be scrutinised in the same way as the taxanes. □

First results of vCJD survey show no signs of prion

Roger Dobson *Wales*

First results from a study of human tissues have shown no evidence of the abnormal prion protein associated with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

A total of 3170 specimens of tonsil and appendix tissue were examined for traces of the protein as part of a study designed to help assess the number of cases of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) that may be incubating in the adult UK population.

Estimates of the total number of cases have varied widely over the past few years, from half a million down to 100. So far, 53 people have died from vCJD, a disease caused by the same strain of agent as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). A further 12 people are alive with vCJD-like symptoms.

Despite the negative results from this first batch of specimens, announced by the Department of Health, the chief medical officer, Professor Liam

Donaldson, urged caution in their interpretation.

"The fact that no positives have been found is welcome news, but these early results should not be taken as an indication of an 'all clear,'" he said.

"The methods of analysis used on the small sample have some limitation. In addition, we do not know at what point in the incubation period tissues, such as tonsils or appendices, could turn positive, how long the incubation period would be, or even whether any individuals who were found positive would necessarily go on to develop the disease."

He added: "The critical gap in our knowledge remains not having a reliable diagnostic test to detect the presence of the abnormal protein at the pre-clinical stage of the disease."

The scientific group chaired by Professor Les Borysiewicz of the University of Wales College of Medicine will eventually look

at the results from studies of 18 000 samples.

The first 3170 samples, analysed at the National CJD Surveillance Unit in Edinburgh and at Derriford Hospital, Plymouth, were archive material from operations that were carried out between 1996 and 1998.

The downside of working with archive material was that some more sensitive analysis techniques could not be used. An added complication was that some samples were not appropriate for analysis. Altogether, 4166 specimens were originally studied, but only 3170 were considered suitable for analysis. More sensitive tests are to be carried out on fresher material.

A further complication—surrounding interpretation of the data—is that the relation between the presence of prion protein in lymphoid tissue and the subsequent onset of vCJD, although thought to be highly probable, is not proved.

Professor Donaldson said that the government was committed to spending some £26m (\$42m) over the next year on research into CJD and BSE issues. □