

In brief

Medicines safety body issues advice on HRT: In the light of recent US research, the Committee on Safety of Medicines has reiterated that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is not recommended for the prevention of coronary heart disease. The risks (small increases in breast cancer, coronary heart disease, and stroke) and benefits (reductions in colorectal cancer and hip fracture) should be discussed with patients wanting to relieve menopausal symptoms or prevent osteoporosis. Women using HRT should have regular check ups.

UK government launches review of organ retention legislation: The UK government has published a major review of legislation on organ and tissue retention in England and Wales for consultation following the Bristol and Alder Hey inquiries. Copies of the review, *Human Bodies, Human Choices*, which asks for views on the removal of organs and tissues from living people, can be accessed at www.doh.gov.uk/tissue

Booking hospital appointments still has a way to go: The results of a pilot programme that tested out the effects of offering booked hospital appointments showed a reduction in the number of patients who did not attend, in cancellations, and in numbers of patients waiting for day case appointments, says a report from Birmingham University. Inpatient booking and booking from general practices, however, were not found to have made as much progress in these areas. *Booking Patients for Hospital Appointments: Lessons from Experience* is available at www.bham.ac.uk/hsmc

Ukrainian healthcare workers demand to be paid: Some 500 doctors, nurses, and other hospital workers mounted a demonstration outside Ukraine's parliament building in Kiev last Friday, demanding several months of unpaid wages. Ukraine's healthcare system has been severely underfunded since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Experts launch action on acrylamide in staple foods

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

Food science experts and officials from Europe and the United States are taking concerted action to try to reduce potentially dangerous levels of acrylamide, a toxin known to cause cancer, in staple foods.

The possible health risk was discussed at a meeting convened by the World Health Organization in Geneva last month, after the announcement in March by Swedish scientists that acrylamides were present in a wide range of foods, particularly fried, starch based foods, such as chips and potato crisps.

The 23 experts concluded that the Swedish findings, verified by scientists in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the United States, Switzerland, and Norway, were disturbing.

"It's not new to find carcinogenic substances in food, but it is the first time we are dealing with substances that are potentially carcinogenic in human staple foods," said Dieter Arnold of the Federal Institute for Consumer Health Protection in Berlin. The experts said that traces of carcinogens can be found in grilled and



VINCE HARTIG/EPHAS

baked meats, but acrylamide represented an even greater danger.

Acrylamide is a known poisonous substance produced in the manufacture of plastics. Its presence in food was a chance discovery by researchers at Stockholm University when testing tunnel workers exposed to large quantities of acrylamide from a water sealant in 1997. After finding similarly high levels in the blood of workers who had not been exposed to the sealant, the researchers concluded that diet was responsible.

Studies to date show that a minimum temperature of 120°C is needed to start formation of acrylamide in foods, although 140°C to 180°C is optimal. "The

hotter and longer you bake or fry, the more carcinogen forms," said Dr Arnold.

In a test conducted by the English Food Standards Agency, scientists found a 10-fold difference between normal and overcooked chips, which experts say is good news, because it means levels can be limited. The carcinogen tends to attack the thyroid gland, female mammary gland, male testes, and mouth, Dr Arnold said.

The experts concluded too little was known about the formation of acrylamides to issue specific guidelines, but recommended a diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. □

Chickenpox vaccine may reduce risk of shingles

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

Stanford University researchers have found that giving an inactivated form of chickenpox vaccine to adults can reduce the risk of herpes zoster (shingles), which strikes elderly people and people with weakened immune systems.

Even among healthy adults the risk of shingles rises each decade after age 60, increasing to one in five people in their 80s. Patients who have had a transplantation are at high risk of the condition, because their immune system is impaired.

Shingles is triggered by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Once someone is infected

by the virus, it remains latent in nerve cells and can be reactivated when the immune system is weakened. It causes an itchy, burning rash and shooting pains that can last for years.

Dr Ann Arvin, chief of paediatric infectious diseases at Lucille Packard Children's Hospital and a professor of microbiology and immunology in Stanford University's medical school, and colleagues decided to see whether inactivated chickenpox vaccine could protect patients with cancer who received haemopoietic cell transplants against such reactivation. They used a heat

inactivated preparation of the childhood vaccine, made for purposes of investigation by Merck and not available commercially.

Reporting in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (2002; 347:26-34), the researchers said that seven of 53 patients who received one dose of the inactivated vaccine within 30 days before the transplantation, followed by three doses after the transplantation, developed shingles, compared with 17 of the 56 participants in the unvaccinated control group.

The researchers believe that administration of inactivated vaccine could benefit other people at risk of shingles and that the strategy of vaccination before transplantation could protect other patients against other viruses and bacteria. □