

In brief

Heart surgeon loses tribunal: Janardan Dhasmana, aged 60, one of the surgeons involved in the Bristol heart babies case, has lost his tribunal claim for unfair dismissal. He was dismissed by United Bristol Healthcare Trust after being found guilty of serious professional misconduct by the General Medical Council in 1998 and banned from operating on children for three years.

Israel's state prosecutor files charges against leading gynaecologist: Zion Ben-Raphael, professor of gynaecology at the Rabin Medical Centre in Petah Tikva, Israel, stands accused of having given five of his patients dangerously large amounts of hormones to produce superfluous ova, with the aim of selling them to other infertile women. Professor Ben-Raphael is also accused of trying to bribe his way out of the investigation against him with \$20 000 (£12 800; €20 400).

US experts say UK bought "wrong" smallpox vaccine: US and UK governments have bought different vaccines to protect citizens against a smallpox attack. The UK Department of Health said: "The choice of new vaccine was made on the basis of advice from the scientific community... Their advice was that there was no significant difference between the two strains on scientific grounds."

New US surgeon general confirmed: Dr Richard Carmona, President Bush's appointee as surgeon general, won unanimous confirmation on 23 July in the Senate. He had faced tough questioning about his qualifications in previous Senate hearings (20 July, p 123).

Arthritis drugs investigated: The European Medicines Evaluation Authority is investigating the arthritis drugs celecoxib (Celebrex) and rofecoxib (Vioxx) to find out how often they can cause heart attacks and gastrointestinal events. It follows a referral from the French government.

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Health professionals question "star ratings" for NHS

Anne Gulland *London*

The best performing hospitals in England are to be awarded up to £1m (\$1.6m; €1.6m) each in the wake of government league tables published last week.

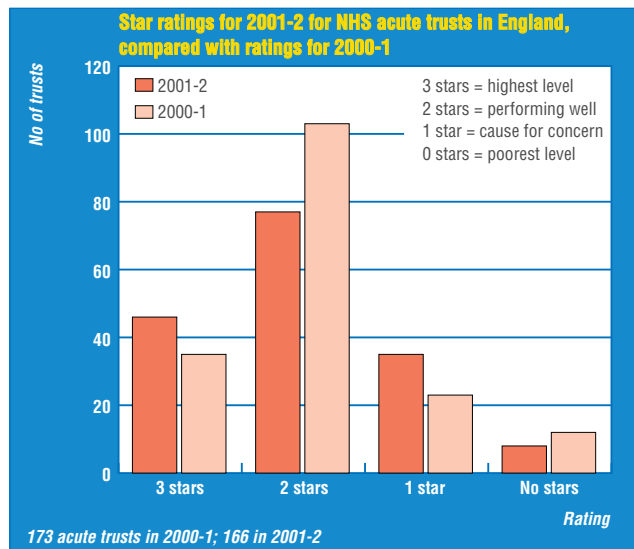
The performance tables give 46 acute trusts a three star rating (highest rating), 77 two stars ("performing well"), and 35 a single star ("cause for concern"). Eight trusts are judged to be so poor that they are given no stars. Health secretary Alan Milburn said the tables showed that hospitals were improving, but health professionals have questioned a grading system whereby hospitals' performance can vary so much from year to year.

David Wilson, chief executive of Northampton General Hospital NHS Trust, one of three trusts to fall from a three star rating last year to one star this year, said that his trust was marked down because it had one patient waiting more than 18 months for an operation and it had overspent its budget by 0.2%.

"One of the problems is that the targets don't measure the quality of clinical care. They are absolutes: either you achieve them or you don't," he said.

Peter Hawker, chairman of the BMA's consultants committee, said: "Despite claims that out-

standing trusts are to be given more freedom and that decision making will devolve to local level, centrally imposed and constantly changing targets dominate NHS managers' lives, with a knock-on



effect on all the health professionals working in the service."

Three star hospitals could be rewarded with up to £1m each and given the opportunity to opt out of "excessive" government control and apply for "foundation

hospital" status. They will be able to pay staff as they wish and use the money from land sales for patient care.

Successful hospitals will be established as "shadow" foundation trusts from next July and will be running from April 2004.

Mr Milburn has insisted: "NHS foundation hospitals will be part of the NHS family and will deliver care for NHS patients on the basis of NHS principles—

treatment that is free, based on need and not ability to pay." (See p 230.) □

Full details of the ratings are available at www.doh.gov.uk/performance/ratings/2002

Former Peruvian government censured over sterilisations

Xavier Bosch *Barcelona*

Alberto Fujimori, former president of Peru, and three former ministers may be accused of genocide by Peru's parliament.

A commission concluded that thousands of Peruvians—mostly poor indigenous people—underwent compulsory surgical sterilisation that resulted in damage to their dignity and physical integrity including deaths due to improper health care.

The report on the "voluntary contraceptive surgery activities" programme set up by Mr Fujimori's government was released on 23 July by health minister Dr Fernando Carbone-Campoverde.

The report said that between 1993 and 1995, surgeons performed 80 395 fallopian tube ligations and 2798 vasectomies. Between 1996 and 2000 the numbers were higher (215 227 and 16 547 respectively).

When Mr Fujimori was re-elected in 1995, he promised that a main goal of his government was to achieve a substantial reduction in Peru's birth rate by the end of the 20th century. The family planning programme was launched in 1995, and after that the health ministry started to issue sterilisation quotas to doctors in rural areas.

A 1998 report released by the Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defence of Women's Rights stated that doctors had been submitted to pressures by the government to get their quotas.

The new report says that "the existence of pressures, incentives, harassment, and threats" makes it doubtful just how voluntary the voluntary sterilisations were.

The report says that the most common threats were that if surgery was rejected "there would be no right to request health care for children, newborns would not be registered, and people would be fined."

Mr Fujimori, who held power from 1990 to 2000, is currently in exile in Japan, where he fled to avoid trial for allegedly sanctioning a massacre by two death squads. □