

In brief

Infertility expert suspended:

The head of the infertility clinic at the University Hospital of Wales, Lukas Klentzeris, has been suspended; the reason is unknown. He was not available for comment.

NICE proposes next treatment reviews:

New treatments for lung cancer, motor neurone disease, and asthma are among those to be considered by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence for its next work programme. Comments on the proposed topics for consideration are invited by the end of September. See www.nice.org.uk for details.

UK to adopt tobacco advertising bill:

Tobacco advertising is set to be banned in the United Kingdom by the end of the year as part of government's strategy to reduce the number of deaths from smoking related diseases. Research shows that such a ban could eventually save up to 3000 lives a year.

Manufacturers of diet supplements face legal action:

The US Food and Drug Administration has prompted the Justice Department to open a criminal investigation into the manufacturer of Metabolife, a herbal stimulant and appetite suppressant containing ephedra, an amphetamine-like drug which has been linked to strokes, hypertension, heart attacks, and seizures. The FDA claims that the manufacturer knowingly suppressed reports of adverse side effects associated with the herbal diet pills.

New guidelines issued on withdrawing treatment:

The United Kingdom's General Medical Council has issued guidance for doctors on withholding and withdrawing life prolonging treatment. The guidelines include when it might be appropriate for a doctor to discuss cardiopulmonary resuscitation with a patient. See www.gmc-uk.org

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Health can take precedence over trade issues, says report

Sanjay Kumar *New Delhi*

In the ongoing tension between the quest for profits and people's health care, "health can take precedence over trade issues," reassures a new joint study by the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

"If necessary, governments may put aside WTO commitments in order to protect human life," said the new report, *WTO Agreements and Public Health*. The principal coordinator of the study was Miguel Rodriguez Mendoza, deputy director general of the WTO.

According to WTO jurisprudence, human health has been recognised as being "important in the highest degree," the report also said.

Serious concerns have been raised that globalisation and the opening of trade barriers advocated under various WTO

agreements could pose a serious threat to public health. The study says that countries have a right to restrict imports or exports of products when it is necessary to protect the health of humans, animals, and plants. Despite the liberalisation of services, countries retain the right to introduce regulations so that they can meet national policy objectives in areas such as health.

Some of the key WTO agreements with health sector implications relate to the technical barriers to trade, sanitary, and phytosanitary measures (covering the safety of human, animal, and plant health), trade related intellectual property rights (TRIPS), and the general agreement on trade in services (GATS).

In several developing countries, there has been apprehension that implementing the TRIPS agreement with stringent patent protection would lead to unaffordable prices of new patented drugs such as the new, effective drugs to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis invented after 1995.

The study says that some helpful mechanisms are open to countries. These include com-



At a tuberculosis treatment station in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

pulsory licensing by the government to authorise the use of an invention without the consent of the patent holder; and the use of parallel imports, which enable a country to take advantage of products available in another country at a lower price. The study, however, recognises the concern that after 2005, countries such as India may not be able to export cheap generic equivalents of drugs, as they will come under the TRIPS patent obligation.

The report also highlights the way some developing countries, such as Cuba, India, and the Philippines export their doctors and nurses while earning foreign exchange remittances, filling supply gaps in the West but also causing enormous losses to governments on investments made in training health professionals.

"An increase in the 'brain drain' of health professionals leaving low-income countries to work in high-income countries can worsen health personnel shortages in developing countries," says the report.

But developing countries could legitimately levy taxes on those leaving countries or require deposits or financial guarantees to minimise the cost of the brain drain. Although advocating liberalisation, the study also calls for greater regulation: "Greater, not less, regulation has accompanied more open markets in financial services and telecommunications, and this will be essential for health services as well," it says. □

WTO Agreements and Public Health is available at www.wto.org



West Nile virus spreads in United States

West Nile virus infections in humans, birds, and animals have been reported from 41 US states. Twenty deaths have occurred among 425 confirmed cases, said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The number of infections is expected to grow as warm weather provides breeding conditions for mosquitoes.

Pictured is New Orleans resident Nick Leggio, with a dead blue jay, which is being tested for West Nile virus.

Meanwhile, the Food and Drug Administration has approved a trial of interferon alfa. The drug may reduce permanent damage from meningitis and encephalitis, which result from the virus.

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*