

credible option and the case had only drawn controversy because of her links with Dr Nitschke.

Christopher Zinn *Sydney*

UK government approves heroin use on prescription

Heroin users should, in certain circumstances, be able to get the drug on prescription from their GP, a Home Office strategy on tackling drug misuse has recommended.

The move recognises that not all users find that methadone, the commonly prescribed substitute, works. For some users, it may be better, initially at least, to prescribe heroin, but then gradually move on to methadone.

The announcement came as part of a major government initiative to tackle the problem of illegal drugs use in the United Kingdom.

The government's latest strategy includes a substantial cash injection for treatment services and an advertising campaign about the dangers of drug misuse, due to start in spring 2003, targeting young people.

The home secretary, David Blunkett, has also announced that the total spend on initiatives to tackle drug misuse will rise to nearly £1.5bn (\$2.3bn; €2.3bn) in 2005-6, an increase of nearly £500m.

Lynn Eaton *London*

Updated Drug Strategy 2002 is available at www.drugs.gov.uk/NationalStrategy

GMC chairman stands down while inquiry takes place

The chairman of one of the General Medical Council's disciplinary committees is to step down while an inquiry is carried out into events that came to light at a GMC hearing last month.

Professor Peter Richards, chairman of the professional

conduct committee, has written to the council's president, Graeme Catto, saying he wishes to step down from his position as committee chairman until matters are resolved.

Last month Dr Clive Handler, a former consultant cardiologist at Northwick Park Hospital, north London, was suspended from practice for 12 months by the GMC for using NHS research funds to subsidise his private practice (23 November, p 1189).

During the course of the hearing it became clear that Dr Handler had been the subject of an earlier inquiry by the hospital, before he left in 1998. One of the terms of his severance agreement was that documents used in the internal inquiry would be destroyed.

Professor Richards had been medical director of the trust when the inquiry was carried out. He told the *BMJ* that he had not personally conducted the internal inquiry at Northwick Park.

In a letter sent this week to Professor Catto, Professor Richards said: "Although I am confident that I acted correctly and in the public interest in this matter, I believe that it is both sensible and in the best interests of the GMC that I stand down as chairman of the professional conduct committee while the matter is resolved."

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

Correction

GMC clears Adler Hey doctor of dishonesty

In this news article (30 November, p 1258), we inadvertently said that Dr Andrew Selby, a consultant paediatrician at Alder Hey Hospital, had been referred to the General Medical Council by the chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson. This was incorrect. Dr Selby was not one of the 16 doctors referred to the GMC by Professor Donaldson. He was appointed in 1995 and had no involvement in the Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital inquiry (*BMJ* 2001;322:260). His referral to the GMC was made by the parents of Owen Williams, the child referred to in the GMC hearing.

Paediatricians did not have duty of care to patient's mother

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

A mother who alleged that Professor David Southall and another paediatrician caused her to develop a psychiatric illness by wrongly diagnosing her child as a possible victim of Munchausen syndrome by proxy is taking her case to the Court of Appeal after it was thrown out by a judge at Chester county court.

Judge Hale ruled that Professor Southall and Dr Karen Whiting, a community paediatrician, owed no duty of care to Janet Davies, mother of Michael, and therefore no claim for negligence could proceed against the former East Berkshire Health Authority, Dr Whiting's employer.



Professor David Southall who thought his patient's mother had exaggerated symptoms of his illness

social service strategy meeting."

No action was taken until Dr Whiting took over as community paediatrician in Berkshire in December 1996. A meeting was convened in March 1997, at which those present included Dr Whiting, Professor Southall, a social worker, and Professor Stephan Strobel of Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London.

Professor Strobel wrote after the meeting: "It was felt that false reporting of the severity of Michael's symptoms, equivalent to Munchausen by proxy, remains a distinct possibility and needs to be ruled out or confirmed."

In April Professor Southall wrote to the child protection coordinator of Berkshire county council suggesting that Michael was at significant risk of suffering harm, and in June the boy's name was put on the at-risk register.

Professor Southall said at the case conference that, although he had no doubt that Michael was allergic, he was concerned that his mother had exaggerated his problem and had sometimes fabricated information about it.

Michael was subsequently assessed by Professor John Warner of Southampton General Hospital, an expert on paediatric allergy, who confirmed that he had severe allergic problems. He was removed from the at-risk register in September 1997, and the suggestion of Munchausen "started to fall away, eventually to disappear," said Judge Hale.

"Once a suspicion arises about someone who was the mother of a patient, there was a clear duty to investigate in the interests of Michael, even if initiating the process might damage the mother," said the judge. "In fact [the doctors] could be negligent in certain circumstances to the child if they did not do so."

He concluded: "In my judgment public policy considerations militate strongly against the existence of any duty of care towards the claimant on the facts of this case. My ruling therefore is that no duty of care exists towards Mrs Davies and that is fatal to this action." □