

## Iraq's hospitals struggle to provide a service

Owen Dyer *London*

Despite attempts to bring some kind of order to medical services in Iraq, hospitals are struggling to provide any kind of service in the face of fresh attacks by looters, lack of electricity, and disrupted medical supplies. A spokesman for the charity Save the Children Fund has reiterated accusations that the lack of cooperation from the US military is breaching the Geneva convention.

Retired US General Jay Garner toured Baghdad's Yarmouk Hospital on 21 April after arriving in the city to take up his post as head of the coalition's Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. The 700 bed hospital was littered with broken glass and still lacked mains power. Its generators are being repaired.

Meanwhile, Baghdad's Saddam Children's Hospital, now renamed the Central Children's Hospital, announced it may have to close after fresh raids by armed looters over the weekend.

Doctors at the children's hospital, once Iraq's primary treatment centre for leukaemia, said that armed men loyal to the city's new self proclaimed mayor, Mohammed Mohsen al-Zubaidi,



General Jay Garner greets a patient at Yarmouk Hospital, Baghdad

had roamed the wards, taking an air conditioner and a refrigerator.

Staff complained that the hospital's guards had fled and that promised American armoured vehicles had not appeared. The hospital eventually appealed to the local mosque to organise protection. "If no one comes to our help we will be forced to leave the hospital tonight when night falls," paediatrician Wa'ad Idan told Reuters.

In Mosul, staff at one hospital fought off looters with their bare hands, according to the Save the Children Fund. Meanwhile, a plane loaded with medical sup-

plies for Mosul and Irbil has been grounded for nearly two weeks, as coalition forces refuse permission for a landing in Irbil.

"The doctors we are trying to help in Mosul have been struggling against the odds for weeks, but now the help we have promised them is being endlessly delayed," said Rob MacGillivray, Save the Children's emergency programme manager. "The lack of cooperation from the US military is a breach of the Geneva convention, but more importantly the time now being wasted is costing children their lives."

An Oxfam flight carrying

water engineers and pumping equipment was due to fly from Britain to Kuwait on Tuesday. They are hoping to restore supplies in Basra and other southern Iraqi cities, but Basra remains effectively shut to aid agencies. The city's water facilities, partially repaired by the Red Cross after the siege, stopped pumping last weekend as workers fled in fear of looters.

On 21 April, the United Arab Emirates promised to construct a new water treatment plant in Basra and said it would also pay to re-equip six of Iraq's hospitals that have been looted.

Basra's hospitals reported an increase in diarrhoeal disease among children, but the feared cholera epidemic has yet to materialise. In the nearby city of Zubayr looters destroyed the chlorine plant, leaving the city with just 15 days' supplies. Zubayr still had no piped water as the *BMJ* went to press.

Food supplies are reaching Iraq in increasing quantities. A UN world food programme convoy from Jordan reached Baghdad on 20 April with 1400 tonnes of wheat. Other world food programme convoys entered northern Iraq from Turkey. Food is considered a less pressing need than water, as the Iraqi government gave out several months' food rations before the war. A food programme spokesman said, however, that many Iraqis will run out of food within two weeks. □

## Nigerians in drug trial take their case to US court

Abiodun Raufu *Lagos*

The families of 52 children who were part of a Pfizer drug trial seven years ago in Kano, northern Nigeria, have taken the multinational drug company to a district court in the US state of Connecticut to demand compensation for damage allegedly sustained during the drug trials.

Pfizer tested its drug trovafloxacin (Trovan) in some children at the Infectious Disease Hospital in Kano in 1996 during an epidemic of meningitis. Many of the children died, while several others developed permanent mental and physical

deformities (*BMJ* 2001;322:194, *BMJ* 2001;323:592).

A counsel for the children, Lukman Ishola, says that Pfizer conducted the trial test of trovafloxacin on paediatric patients in a secretive manner without consent of their parents and guardians. He also claimed that the children's families were not told that they were taking part in a drug test.

The lawyers are demanding \$5m (£3.2m; €4.6m) compensation from Pfizer for each of the children, in addition to \$25m as punitive damages.

"My friends persuaded me to understand that if we fail to let the world know the injustice done to our children in Nigeria by this company, they will go on to other countries to do the same," said Ali Darma, father of 12 year old Naja'atu Ali Darma, who was one of the children tested and who is now deaf and without speech.

"That is why I agreed to join the suit. It is not the compensation that really matters but to see that our children's agony and pains do not go in vain. Those who are responsible for this must pay the price."

Pfizer's counsel, Abdullahi Ibrahim, however, denied the claims: "These allegations are unsupported and simply false."

The children's families said they had to resort to an Ameri-

can court after losing confidence in the ponderous Nigerian judicial system, which has stalled their case since March 2001, when it was first filed in court.

Mr Darma said that they decided to withdraw the case from Nigeria and take it to the US court when it became clear that they were not likely to get justice in Nigeria after their case was adjourned more than 14 times.

"It is unfortunate that a citizen of Nigeria cannot get justice in his own country," said Mr Darma. "All our efforts at getting justice have failed as a result of unending adjournments."

Mr Ibrahim, however, absolved Pfizer of any blame: "The delay in this case was due to actions and inactions by the plaintiffs' counsel." □