

In brief

European agency to review safety of COX 2 inhibitors: The European Medicines Evaluation Agency has announced that it will review "all aspects of cardiovascular safety" of all COX 2 (cyclo-oxygenase-2) inhibitors in the light of newly available data and the withdrawal of rofecoxib (Vioxx) (*BMJ* 2004;329:816, 9 Oct).

Byrne takes up post in WHO: David Byrne, the European Union's commissioner for health and consumer protection, is to take on a new role as a special envoy for the World Health Organization, in charge of updating the international health regulations on the control of infectious diseases, which were first adopted in 1969.

France announces another vCJD case: French health authorities have announced an eighth case of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), the first where the patient had donated blood, which has been used in making clotting factors and other blood products. The donations occurred between 1993 and 2003, and the 10 patients who received the blood are being traced, while the blood products, some of which have been used, are being recalled.

Court refuses to revoke its earlier ruling in right to die case: The Florida Supreme Court has declined a request by Governor Jeb Bush to reconsider its 7-0 decision deeming "Terri's law" unconstitutional. The law, passed in November 2003, enabled the governor to order the reinsertion of a feeding tube in Mrs Terri Schiavo, who has been in a persistent vegetative state since a cardiac arrest in 1990 (*BMJ* 2003;327:1010).

Slovakia to charge for minor treatments: Slovakia's parliament has passed a health reform package under which patients will pay directly towards their treatment for less serious illnesses. The bills, aimed at cutting the health service's debt of £66m (\$120m; €95m), extend charges introduced last year for GP consultations and stays in hospital.

Shortage of emergency doctors will take eight years to rectify

Geoff Watts *London*

More than 96% of patients now spend fewer than four hours in accident and emergency departments, says an interim report, on progress in reforming NHS emergency care. In a briefing held earlier this week, Professor George Alberti, national director for emergency access, added that the figure will reach 98% by the end of the year.

Central to this achievement, he said, had been the collection of better information about the causes of waiting times—specifically, shortages of beds and specialists, and delays in diagnostic testing. Tackling these should bring still more improvements.

The present strategy was first outlined in the government's 2001 blueprint *Reforming Emergency Care*. The new interim report comes two years after Professor Alberti's appointment by the Department of Health as emergency care "tsar"—a post that has changed his previous dislike of targets in medicine. "I'm a total convert to targets as far as emergency care goes," he said.

On bed numbers he pointed out that availability is not solely a consequence of what happens in emergency departments. "Simple things like making decisions on discharge before 10 am can free a bed [elsewhere in the hospital] at the beginning rather than the end of the day."

Professor Alberti conceded that some problems remained. "We are aware of certain patient groups who are still not getting good care," he said. These include children, the elderly, and people with mental health problems—all of whom will be better catered for in the future.

"We are also very short of acute physicians. The Royal College of Physicians wants three per acute trust by 2008." As elsewhere in medicine, the roots of the problem lie in the claim advanced 15 years ago—and now demonstrably incorrect—that Britain already had enough doctors.

Although confident of eventual success, he admitted that, in the short term, bridging the gap will be difficult. International

recruitment has been moderately productive but not always in the most needed specialties. "It's probably going to be eight years before we hit the desired numbers," Professor Alberti believes. "But things will improve year on year."

Speaking of the success of emergency nurse practitioners, he pointed out that not everything done to patients required a medical degree. But when a specialist opinion was essential, "anyone who needs to see a specialist should be seen within one hour."

He applauded the "see and treat" principle. This arrangement, under which patients are seen first by a clinician with the competence to begin immediate treatment, had probably been the biggest single factor in reducing waiting times.

Commenting on the report, the shadow health secretary, Andrew Lansley, said: "At the moment the opportunity to improve emergency care alongside out of hours services for GPs is being lost because the government is not engaging GPs sufficiently in ensuring a GP lead service in the community." □

Transforming Emergency Care in England is accessible at www.dh.gov.uk

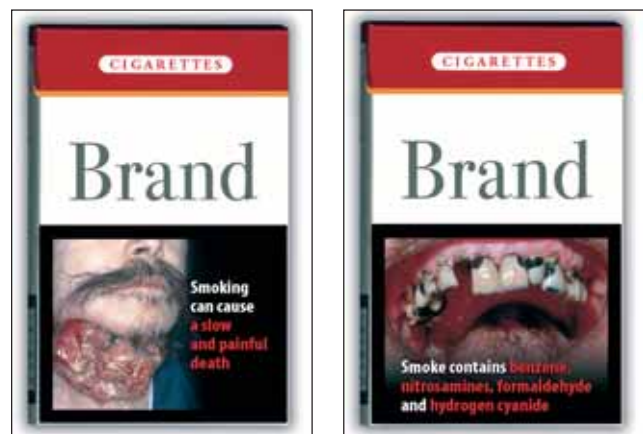
Commission unveils shocking pictures for cigarette packs

Rory Watson *Brussels*

Cigarette packets throughout the European Union could soon be carrying images of dead bodies, cancerous tumours, rotting teeth, and diseased organs as part of a campaign to show the public, especially young people, the dangers of smoking.

The European Commission unveiled a database of 42 pictures last week that national governments can now make manufacturers put on the packets alongside existing warnings such as "Smokers die younger" and "Smoking causes fatal lung cancer."

Presenting the photos, David Byrne, the EU's public health commissioner, said, "People need



Two of the 42 pictures unveiled by the EU commission last week

to be shocked out of their complacency about tobacco. The true face of smoking is disease, death, and horror—not the glamour and sophistication the pushers in the tobacco industry try to portray."

The use of pictures to try to shock smokers and would be smokers was pioneered with success in Canada. Thailand,

Brazil, and Singapore have already followed suit, and Ireland and Belgium have confirmed they will do so next year. The British government is also looking into their use. □

The photos are at http://europa.eu.int/comm/mediateque/photo/select/tabac_en.htm