

In brief

Dutch GPs settle dispute: GPs have settled a bitter eight month dispute with the Dutch government over the funding of primary care in a new market oriented health insurance system. The dispute sparked national strikes (*BMJ* 2005;330:1409, 18 Jun). But independent arbitration resulted in a deal that strengthened the position of GPs in negotiations with insurance companies.

Canadian province funds breast cancer drug: British Columbia has become the first Canadian province to provide the breast cancer drug trastuzumab (Herceptin) to women who may benefit from it. It costs up to \$C50000 (£23 500; \$41 000; €34 000) a year per patient.

UK to tighten hospital hygiene rules: The UK government has launched new legislative proposals to improve hygiene in hospitals. The proposals, which will eventually be incorporated into a parliamentary bill, make good infection control and hygiene practice a statutory duty for NHS bodies. See www.dh.gov.uk/Consultations/fs/en

Development group seeks new drug: The "drugs for neglected diseases" initiative, a non-profit drug development initiative established in 2003, has signed an agreement to conduct a joint research project with the Kitasato Institute in Japan to find a treatment for African trypanosomiasis. Under the agreement the institute will test 300-400 natural substances for activity against the *Trypanosoma brucei* parasite.

German research body censures professor: The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) has admonished Rolf-Hermann Ringert, director of the urology department of Göttingen University Hospital, for scientific misconduct. Professor Ringert was lead author of a paper, published in 2000 in *Nature Medicine*, claiming to have found a safe and effective vaccine for kidney cancer (*BMJ* 2001;323:184). The paper had to be withdrawn in 2003.

25 000 civilians have been killed in Iraq since invasion

Owen Dyer *London*

The number of civilians killed in the Iraq war from the invasion of 20 March 2003 to 19 March this year is 24 865, reports Iraq Body Count, an organisation that keeps track of reported deaths of civilians in Iraq. A further 42 500 civilians were reported wounded.

The report is sure to generate controversy, not least because of its finding that the group respon-

sible for killing the most civilians is the US armed forces and not insurgents or terrorists. The report also shows that the second year of the occupation has seen almost twice as many civilian casualties as the first.

Confidence is growing that the true count of violent deaths of civilians is around the 25 000 mark, says John Sloboda, a pro-



A new report says that the group responsible for killing the most civilians (such as those pictured above) is the US armed forces

fessor of psychiatry at Keele University, Staffordshire, and co-founder of Iraq Body Count.

He said, "We still hear a lot about the famous and often misrepresented *Lancet* survey, but the UN development programme produced its 2004 Iraq living conditions survey in May based on a bigger representative sample [21 688 households]. That survey estimated a 95% confidence interval of 18 000 to 29 000 deaths, so we are smack in the middle of that, which is reassuring."

"We are also within the confidence intervals of the *Lancet* study, which were 8000 to 194 000, so we aren't actually contradicting them. Moreover, they included non-violent deaths and were counting all cause excess mortality."

Iraq Body Count's principal method is to record all deaths that have been independently reported by two trusted sources, mostly Western media. But because the collapse in security has increasingly confined Western journalists to the protected "green zone," the group has come to rely more on Iraqi journalists and particularly on Iraqi government sources, said Professor Sloboda.

The report can be accessed at www.iraqbodycount.net/

Trusts ignoring safety alerts should be named, says CMO

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

The chief medical officer, Liam Donaldson, has called for details to be made public of NHS organisations that fail to comply with alerts concerning patients' safety.

Launching his annual report last week, he said the NHS was failing in this area of health and specifically called on the Healthcare Commission to pay special attention to compliance with safety alerts. He also called for a national group to be established to review the effect of safety alerts and to identify factors that impede compliance.

"I have examined experience in implementing four national

safety alerts. The uptake by local NHS services was, in places, slow and inconsistent. The NHS needs to strengthen its performance in this area," he said.

He also drew attention to the congenital anomaly gastroschisis, the number cases of which, he said, is rising with no good reason.

"The number of cases of gastroschisis has almost trebled in the last 10 years—particularly in babies born to young mothers," said Professor Donaldson. "I want to see more research into the underlying causes and investigation into the reasons behind the recent increase in numbers of cases."

The report also recommends better funding of regional registers of congenital anomalies, which would cost an estimated £1.5m (\$2.6m; €2.2m) a year for the whole of England. Professor Donaldson said he had heard of people who were trying to run such registers being hampered by going "hand to mouth" for continued funding.

The chief medical officer also wanted to see tighter controls on tobacco smuggling and cheap tobacco. It is estimated that UK taxes and duties had been avoided on 25% of all cigarettes and 75% of all hand rolling tobacco consumed in England, so that the price of an illicit pack of cigarettes was £2.50 rather than the legal price of £4.89.

"Smuggled and cheap tobacco undermines health and health inequality goals by making tobacco widely available at much cheaper prices," he said, and he called for closer cooperation between the United Kingdom and other European Union countries in dealing with the problem.

The present "ridiculous" cross border limit of 3200 cigarettes or 3 kg of hand rolling tobacco should be reduced to 200 cigarettes or 250 g of hand rolling tobacco, he said.

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