



NEWS

Seven days in medicine: 27 September to 3 October

Abortion

Ireland to vote on abortion law in 2018

The Irish government is to hold a referendum on whether to relax its abortion law. Voters will be asked to decide whether to change the Irish constitution, which allows abortion only if the mother's life is in danger. A woman convicted of having an illegal abortion faces up to 14 years in jail. However, women are allowed to travel abroad for termination. If the referendum goes ahead it would be held in May or June, weeks before Pope Francis is scheduled to visit Ireland.

Breast cancer

Women with disabilities miss out on screening

Women with disabilities are a third less likely to take part in breast cancer screening and a quarter less likely to take part in bowel cancer screening than women without a disability, said research published in the *British Journal of Cancer*.¹ The study found that women in England with disabilities that affected eyesight, mobility, and their ability to look after themselves were least likely to take part in cancer screening. And lack of access to a car increased the likelihood of women with a disability missing breast screening.

Progress in outcomes is “stalling,” charity warns

Falling uptake in screening, delayed treatment, and a shortage of diagnosticians are leading to a “worrying plateau in progress” in breast cancer outcomes, said the UK charity Breast Cancer Now. Its report highlighted that 72.1% of eligible women took up screening in 2015-16, down from 74.8% in 2005-06; that 93.5% of patients began treatment within 62 days of referral in the first quarter of 2017-18, down from 97% in 2011-12; and that 21% of breast radiologists were due to retire by 2020.² It also said that too few postmenopausal women with primary breast cancer were receiving bisphosphonates, despite a study showing two years ago that the drugs could reduce the risk of breast cancer spreading to bone by 28%.

Epsom salts

Warning issued over liver damage

A 38 year old man developed serious liver damage after taking Epsom salts to treat gallstones, said doctors in the journal *BMJ Case Reports*.³ The man had lost his appetite and was jaundiced, and a biopsy specimen showed that he had signs of liver damage. A naturopath had advised the patient to take three tablespoons of Epsom salts in lukewarm water to treat gallstones. The man was advised to stop taking the salts and to drink plenty of fluids,

and he was given medication. After six weeks his liver function had returned to normal.

Out-of-hours indemnity

£10m scheme will cover GPs fees over winter

NHS England has made £10m (€11.3m; \$13.4m) available for indemnity costs to help GPs working out-of-hours shifts from 1 October 2017 until Easter Monday (2 April) 2018 to allow them to commit to more shifts without needing to negotiate changes to their indemnity cover. Doctors' leaders and providers of out-of-hours GP services have been warning about an impending winter crisis for months, because spiralling indemnity fees have meant that fewer doctors could afford to work. The BMA's Richard Vautrey welcomed the funding, but added, “GPs need a long term solution to the indemnity crisis, and this is something which the BMA is continuing to lobby the government on.” (For longer story see doi:10.1136/bmj.j4521.)

Court ruling

Boy with autism can have £100 a day drug

NHS England has agreed to fund a drug that costs £100 a day for a boy with autism and phenylketonuria after a High Court judge ruled that its original refusal to pay for the drug was “fundamentally flawed.” The drug, sapropterin dihydrochloride, prevents protein accumulating to dangerous concentrations in the blood of patients with phenylketonuria, causing brain damage. The 7 year old boy's severe autism makes the usual dietary treatment hard to manage. NHS England had previously claimed that the drug's clinical effectiveness had not been established.⁴

Measles

Disease officially no longer endemic in UK

The UK, Denmark, and Spain have eliminated endemic measles, meaning that 33 countries in WHO's European region are now officially free of the disease, having had no endemic transmission for at least 36 months, the World Health Organization said. At the end of 2016 42 of the 53 countries in the region had interrupted endemic transmission of measles for at least 12 months.

Medical errors

Apologising does not increase risk of lawsuits

Explaining and apologising to patients after a medical error has resulted in injury does not result in an increase in numbers of lawsuits, a US study published in *Health Affairs* found. Researchers analysed 989 adverse events investigated by

hospitals in cases that included an explanation to patients of what happened, an apology, and offer of compensation where appropriate. Only 5.1% of adverse events (47 of 929) led to claims or lawsuits, and 4% of the total, including those referred because patients had made a claim, were settled without lawsuits, with generally modest compensation (median \$75 000). (Longer story doi:10.1136/bmj.j4536)

Nobel prize

Medicine award goes to scientists who unravelled genetics of biological clock

The 2017 Nobel prize for physiology or medicine, worth nine million Swedish krona (£830 000; €940 000; £1.1m), has been awarded to three scientists for their work deciphering the molecular mechanisms controlling the body clock. In the 1980s Jeffrey Hall and Michael Rosbash at Brandeis University, Massachusetts, and, separately, Michael Young at Rockefeller University, New York, isolated the genes relating to circadian rhythm in fruit flies. Hall and Rosbash then discovered that levels of the PER protein encoded by the period gene built up during the night and fell during daytime. Young found that the “timeless” gene he identified made a protein named TIM that is also needed for a normal circadian rhythm.

Delayed discharges

Delays linked to increased mortality

Delayed discharges from hospitals are more common at times of higher mortality, a study published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* has found.⁵ The number of deaths per month between August 2010 and March 2016 was compared with the cumulative number of days that acute care patients in England were late being discharged. The analysis indicated that for each additional day of late discharge the number of deaths increased by 0.39 (95% confidence interval 0.22 to 0.57). The findings for non-acute admissions were

mixed. The researchers hypothesised that delays in discharge may postpone access to the right type of care for the patients affected and have a knock-on effect on care for patients yet to be admitted.

Depression

An hour or two of exercise a week nearly halves long term risk

The risk of developing depression was 44% lower in people who exercised for one or two hours a week than in people who had no regular physical activity, analysis of data concerning 22 564 people in the Norwegian Health Study of Nord-Trøndelag County found. None had depression or anxiety at baseline, but 9-13 years later 7% of participants (1578) had developed clinically significant symptoms of depression and 8.7% (1972) developed anxiety. The researchers, reporting in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*,⁶ calculated that 12% of the depression cases could have been prevented if people in the study had taken at least one hour of exercise every week.

- 1 Floud S, Barnes I, Verfürden M, et al. Disability and participation in breast and bowel cancer screening in England: a large prospective study. *Br J Cancer* 2017. doi:10.1038/bjc.2017.331 pmid:28972966.
- 2 Breast Cancer Now. Good enough? Breast cancer in the UK. September 2017. http://breastcancer.org/sites/default/files/public/good_enough_-_breast_cancer_in_the_uk_-_report.pdf.
- 3 Philips CA, Paramaguru R, Mahadevan P, Augustine P. Severe liver injury due to Epsom salt naturopathy. *BMJ Case Rep* 2017;359:bcr-2017-221718. doi:10.1136/bcr-2017-221718 pmid:28970193.
- 4 Dyer C. NHS decision to deny drug to boy with severe autism was “fundamentally flawed”. *BMJ* 2017;359:j3822. doi:10.1136/bmj.j3822 pmid:28794057.
- 5 Green MA, Dorling D, Minton J, Pickett KE. Could the rise in mortality rates since 2015 be explained by changes in the number of delayed discharges of NHS patients? *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2017;jech-2017-209403. doi:10.1136/jech-2017-209403 pmid:28970194.
- 6 Harvey SB, Øverland S, Hatch SL, Wessely S, Mykletun A, Hotopf M. Exercise and the prevention of depression: results of the HUNT Cohort Study. *Am J Psychiatry* 2017;p201716111223. doi:10.1176/appi.ajp.2017.16111223. pmid:28969440.

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