

*Body and Soul: Forced Sterilization and Other Assaults on Roma Reproductive Freedom* is accessible at [www.crlp.org/pub\\_bo\\_slovakia.html](http://www.crlp.org/pub_bo_slovakia.html)

## German doctors “work to rule” in protest over government plans

Many doctors in Germany are providing only minimum care to their patients, in protest over the government's announcement that the health insurance budget for doctors will not be raised this year.

General practitioners and specialists with practices outside hospital are not officially allowed to go on strike. But since German health minister Ulla Schmidt announced that the health insurance budget for doctors would not be raised this year, thousands of doctors are effectively “working to rule,” providing only essential medical care to their patients.

Several practices were closed for a day last week when doctors claimed that they were attending medical lectures. Most of the lectures, however, were discussions about health politics.

The Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians (Kassenärztliche Bundesvereinigung), which organises a great deal of medical care in Germany, defended the actions and claimed that patients did not have to suffer from the “strike” action.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

## Dietary acrylamide may not cause cancer

High levels of the presumed carcinogen acrylamide in foods such as chips, crisps, and bread do not seem to raise the risk of cancers of the large bowel, bladder, and kidney, a study into the effects of the chemical has said (*British Journal of Cancer* 2003;88:84-9).

Acrylamide was classified as a probable human carcinogen by the International Agency for

Research on Cancer (IARC) in 1994, largely based on evidence from animal models. In April 2002, a Swedish survey found substantially raised levels of acrylamide in everyday food products such as biscuits and cereals.

The new population based, case-control study was carried out in Sweden. It compared the diets of 987 patients with cancers of the large bowel (591 patients), bladder (263), and kidney (133) with those of 538 healthy people.

The authors found a consistent lack of excess risk or of any convincing trend of cancer of the bowel, bladder, or kidney in high consumers of 14 different food items with a high (range 300-1200 µg/kg) or moderate (30-299 µg/kg) acrylamide content.

Debashis Singh *London*

## Scotland breaks rank to offer compensation to hepatitis C victims

Scottish ministers have signalled their intention to compensate people who contracted hepatitis C from contaminated blood products, in the latest health policy split to emerge in the United Kingdom. A compensation package has already been ruled out in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

The Scottish Executive is prepared to make £15m (\$25m; €23m) available to help 568 people who are registered as having contracted hepatitis C before screening was introduced to remove it from blood supplies.

However, the scheme needs the approval of the UK government, which may challenge the legitimacy of the Scottish Executive to make such payments. Although responsibility for health is fully devolved to the Scottish parliament, benefits for injury and illness are the responsibility of the UK government. Officials in Edinburgh and London are currently involved in discussions over the matter.

Bryan Christie *Edinburgh*

## Trial shows that homoeopathic arnica is no better than placebo

Susan Mayor *London*

Homoeopathic arnica failed to show any advantage compared with placebo in reducing post-operative pain, bruising, and swelling in patients having elective hand surgery in results from a small randomised trial published this week.

The trial randomised 64 adults having elective surgery for carpal tunnel syndrome to three groups. The first group took three tablets of homoeopathic arnica 30C (“high potency,” 30 centesimal solutions) for seven days before surgery and for 14 days afterwards. The second group took three tablets of arnica 6C (“low potency,” 6 centesimal solutions) each day, and the third group took placebo tablets over the same time period.

Results showed no differences between the three groups in the primary outcome of pain (assessed by the short form McGill pain questionnaire) ( $P=0.79$ ) and bruising (measured by colour separation analysis) ( $P=0.45$ ) at four days after surgery.

There was also no difference in swelling (based on wrist circumference) or use of analgesic medication between the arnica and placebo groups in the study (*Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 2003;96:60-5).

The research was funded by a charity, the Dr Susil Kumar and Jamila Mitra Charitable Trust (UK), while the homoeopathic and placebo tablets were supplied by the homoeopathic medicines manufacturer A Nelson.

One of the researchers, Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine at the University of Exeter, said: “Despite its reputation as a useful intervention for preventing the effects of anticipated trauma or for treating unexpected trauma, homoeopathic arnica was no better than placebo in reducing postoperative complications.”

He noted that the results were compatible with negative findings from other studies and suggested that they did not support the routine use of homoeopathic arnica for preventing or reducing post-operative complications such as bruising, swelling, or pain.

He hoped that the study would “help people to look for more effective treatments and

save money by not buying homoeopathic arnica.”

The research group acknowledged that more than a third of study participants showed poor adherence to the trial regimen but considered that this was unlikely to have explained the lack of difference between arnica and placebo, particularly as homoeopathic practitioners often recommend that a single dose of arnica before and after surgery is enough to speed recovery.

Homoeopathic remedies are becoming popular in the United Kingdom and in many other countries and are available from certain NHS clinics. They are based on the law of similars (“like cures like”), which states that a substance that causes specific symptoms in a healthy person can be used to treat the same symptoms in someone who is sick. Remedies undergo a process called potentiation, in which the starting solution is diluted and shaken. A remedy is thought to become more potent the more it is diluted, even though there is a very low chance of even a single molecule remaining in potencies beyond 12C (12 centesimal dilutions).

Homoeopathic arnica is derived from the alpine plant *Arnica montana*.

Professor Ernst considered that arnica had probably developed a reputation for healing due to positive selection bias. Some patients recovered quickly after surgery. Those who took arnica attributed their rapid recovery to this remedy and told others about it, he suggested. “Those who received no benefit from arnica were less likely to discuss the lack of effect with others,” he concluded. □



*Arnica mollis*, a relative of *Arnica montana*, the species used in the herb trade