

bmj.com news roundup

Full versions of these stories are available at: bmj.com/content/vol333/issue7573/#NEWS_ROUNDUP

Decline in smoking accounts for 40% of fall in US male cancer mortality

Around 40% of the fall in the number of deaths from cancer among US men from 1991 to 2003 can be attributed to the decline in smoking, say researchers from the American Cancer Society.

Writing in *Tobacco Control* (2006;15:345-7), Michael Thun and Ahmedin Jemal, of the society's department of epidemiology and surveillance research, say that around 146 000 men in the United States owe their lives to anti-smoking efforts. But no such improvement has yet been seen in women, who took up smoking later than men and have been slower to give it up.

The age adjusted cancer mortality in the US population peaked in 1991. From then until 2003, the most recent year for which data are available, mortality fell by 16.1% among men and by 8.4% among women.

"A large number of deaths from lung cancer were avoided because of the decrease in the lung cancer death rate in men during this period ... [which] reflects reductions in cigarette smoking that occurred because of anti-smoking messages and other tobacco-control measures implemented since the 1950s," the authors wrote.

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Epilepsy is misdiagnosed in 90 000 people a year in England and Wales

Each year more than 90 000 people in England and Wales are wrongly given a diagnosis of epilepsy, a new study has estimated. This scale of misdiagnosis may be resulting in unnecessary costs of as much as £138m (€205m; \$257m) a year, it says.

The study, which was published ahead of print publication on 29 September in *Seizure* (www.sciencedirect.com, doi:



STILL PICTURES

One in four autopsy reports in UK is substandard, report finds

A quarter of reports on autopsies requested by UK coroners are poor or unacceptable, concludes an audit of coroners' autopsy practice. The audit report calls for national criteria and standards to improve the quality of autopsies.

The report reviewed coroners' autopsies from one week in May 2005 in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Guernsey, Jersey, and the Isle of Man. Scotland was not included because it operates under a different legal system.

Sebastian Lucas, one of the report's authors and clinical coordinator at the National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcome and Death (NCEPOD), an independent body that reviews the quality and safety of medical care, said: "We don't manage death well in this country. It is important that the aim of coronial autopsy is clarified. We want the public to agree what level of investigation is appropriate and then [we want] measures in place to reduce the huge variation in the quality of autopsies."

Susan Mayor *London*

The Coroner's Autopsy: Do we Deserve Better? is available for free at www.ncepod.org.uk or as a CD (£15) from NCEPOD, Epworth House, 25 City Road, London EC1Y 1AA.

10.1016/j.seizure.2006.08.005), says that diagnosing epilepsy is difficult and that misdiagnosis occurs in one in four cases, largely as a result of patients being seen by medical practitioners who are not specialists in epilepsy.

The study's authors recommend that "all individuals with a recent onset suspected seizure need to be seen as soon as possible by a specialist medical practitioner with training and expertise in epilepsy."

Commissioners of health care should minimise misdiagnosis by ensuring that recent national evidence based guidelines on the management of epilepsy are followed, say the authors, who also developed the 2004 guidelines on

epilepsy of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, the body that advises on use of drugs in the NHS.

Roger Dobson *Aberavenny*

US eases its restrictions on prescription drugs from Canada

The US government has eased restrictions on its citizens importing prescribed drugs from outside the country, after intensive lobbying by patients' groups demanding access to cheaper prescription drugs from Canada.

Although it is still illegal generally to import drugs from Canada or any other country into the United States, US consumers who buy small quantities of prescription drugs in person, through the internet or by mail order, for their personal use will no longer have to worry about their drugs being seized at the border.

In late September the US Congress agreed to allow US citizens visiting Canada to buy and bring back legally a 90 day supply of prescription drugs for personal use.

For years US citizens living close to the Canadian border have crossed into Canada to buy prescription drugs. Canadian prescription drugs are usually cheaper than US drugs, mainly because the Canadian government regulates drug prices.

The US Department of Homeland Security said that from 9 October 2006 it would stop the confiscation of prescription drugs mailed from Canadian internet pharmacies to US citizens.

Barbara Kermod-Scott *Calgary*

SSRI use during pregnancy is associated with fetal abnormalities

Women who take selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) during early pregnancy may increase the risk of having a child with a congenital malformation, a new study reports. However, the researchers say that it is not clear whether the increased risk is due to the drugs themselves or to other factors related to the women's underlying disease.

The research, which was published online ahead of print publication in *Epidemiology* on 4 October, showed that women who took an SSRI during the second or third month of pregnancy had nearly twice the risk of having children with congenital malformations as women who took no SSRI during pregnancy (www.epidem.com, doi: 10.1097/01Ede.0000239581.76793.ae).

No increased risk was found among women who used other types of antidepressants or among women who were prescribed SSRIs in late pregnancy.