

IN BRIEF

Ireland withdraws programme against cervical cancer: The Irish health minister has reversed her decision to fund the vaccination against human papillomavirus of the country's 12 years old girls to save €10m (£8m; \$13m) from an annual health budget of €16bn. Vaccination, which can protect against cervical cancer, will be available only to girls whose parents can afford the €600 cost of private immunisation.

Aboriginal people have problems accessing care: Indigenous people in Canada with severe kidney disease were 43% less likely than non-indigenous people to visit a nephrologist, researchers in Alberta have found (*CMAJ* 2008 Nov 4, doi:10.1503/cmaj.080063).

High rates of obesity in China: A study of 2.5 million men and women has shown high rates of overweight and obesity in rural China. Using the World Health Organization standard, the prevalence of body mass index for overweight (25-29.9) and obesity (≥ 30) was 21.8% and 3.1% in men and 23.1% and 4.7% in women (*Preventive Medicine* 2008 Nov 5, doi:10.1016/j.ypmed.2008.10.020).

Hospital fees violate constitution in South Sudan: Makur Matur, the director of public health in south Sudan, an area with many of the world's worst health indicators, has complained that the recent imposition of hospital fees is a violation of the interim constitution. The constitution says that health care should be free for all.

Campaign against obesity for England: Alan Johnson, the health secretary, has launched the Change4life coalition (www.nhs.uk/change4life) to promote a healthier lifestyle to try to tackle the country's obesity problem. If nothing is done to help people to adopt a more active lifestyle and eat more healthily 90% of today's children will be obese by 2050, he said.

Experts call for integration of traditional medicine: The World Health Organization has called for the integration of traditional medicine into primary healthcare systems. At the WHO congress on traditional medicine, held in Beijing, China, experts from more than 70 countries called on governments to establish systems for the qualification, accreditation, and licensing of practitioners of traditional medicine.

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Campaign launched for health workers

Peter Moszynski LONDON
An international campaign to support rural health workers in the developing world has been launched "to give people caught up in conflict, disaster, and health system collapse the chance to lead healthy lives."

The Hands Up for Health Workers campaign (www.handsupforhealthworkers.org), run by the UK medical charity Merlin, aims to ensure that all health workers in the developing world receive a

regular wage and that workers in remote and isolated areas receive incentives to stay.

The charity also wants to secure funding to train the additional health workers who are needed to deliver essential health care, and to refresh the skills of existing ones. All health workers should also be able to practise in a safe and secure working environment, it says.

"No community, let alone country, can hope to achieve social and economic

development without enough skilled and motivated health workers," says the charity.

"Three of the eight millennium development goals cannot be reached without health workers. Billions of dollars in aid are spent on malaria, HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis, yet such funding rarely covers the cost of skilled health workers—the very people who are central to tackling these diseases effectively."

Merlin points out that a

Trust decides against action to force girl to undergo transplant

Clare Dyer BMJ

A terminally ill 13 year old British girl is to be allowed to die at home after a primary care trust decided not to try to force her to undergo a heart transplant.

Hannah Jones persuaded Herefordshire Primary Care Trust that she was competent to make her own decisions about medical treatment and was making an informed choice not to have the operation that could have prolonged her life.

Hannah, of Marden, near Hereford, was given a diagnosis of leukaemia at age 4 years. Cardiomyopathy was diagnosed while she was undergoing chemotherapy for the disease. Last year she became critically ill, and earlier this year she had a pacemaker fitted.



Hannah Jones demonstrated awareness that she could die

She was told that the only long term solution was a heart transplant, and the doctors treating her strongly recommended an operation at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London. But she was warned that the operation was risky and that the drug she would be given to prevent rejection could cause the leukaemia to recur.

She decided not to go ahead with the operation and to return home to her parents and three siblings.

The family told the media that they believe a locum doctor treating Hannah at Hereford County Hospital alerted Herefordshire Primary Care Trust. The trust telephoned the family to say that it was considering court proceedings to decide whether the transplan-

Heroin remains at the centre of Europe's

Rory Watson BRUSSELS

Although drug misuse remains at historically high levels, it is entering a more stable phase, the latest annual report from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction reports.

Wolfgang Götz, the centre's director, notes, "Overall, for most forms of consumption, we are not seeing major increases, and in some areas trends appear to be downwards. Indi-

cators for amphetamines and ecstasy use, for example, suggest an overall steady or declining situation."

Cannabis remains the most widely used drug, with 71 million people in Europe between the ages of 15 and 64 (equivalent to just over 20% of the adult population) admitting to having taken it at least once.

The report, released in Brussels on 6 November, confirms an increasing tendency

in developing countries

woman dies in childbirth every minute but that research shows that maternal mortality can be cut by nearly three quarters when women have access to reproductive health services, particularly trained midwives.

“The World Health Organization estimates that the continent [Africa] needs at least one million more health workers—from community midwives and nurses to doctors and pharmacists—to deliver quality essential health care.

Globally, four million more health workers are needed. Nowhere is this shortage more acute than in remote rural areas and countries caught up in conflict,” it says.

The campaign is being launched on 20 November with an exhibition at the Barbican, London, by renowned photographer Frederic Courbet, who has documented the conditions of health workers in the Central African Republic.

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This mother, in the Central African Republic, had to walk 40 km to reach qualified care

MERLIN/FREDERIC COURBET

tation was in her best interests.

The next day Hannah was interviewed by a member of the child protection team, who decided she was competent to make up her own mind, and the trust elected not to launch a court case. In a letter the trust's chief executive, Chris Bull, told Hannah's parents, Andrew and Kirsty: “The PCT [primary care trust] concluded that it was not appropriate to seek a court order to require you to permit Hannah to be admitted to hospital.

“Hannah appears to understand the serious nature of her condition. She demonstrated awareness that she could die. Treatment options were discussed and Hannah was able to express her clear views that she did not wish to go back into hospital.”

Her parents expressed anger in media interviews at the trust's interference. But doctors are under a duty to act in a child patient's best interests, which may not coincide with the wishes of parents.

Under English law, if a child is mature enough to be competent to make an informed decision, he or she may refuse treatment, just as an adult may.

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Washington state legalises physician assisted suicide

Clare Dyer *BMJ*

The US state of Washington has become the second US state to legalise physician assisted suicide, 11 years after Oregon, its neighbour to the south.

Initiative 1000, modelled on Oregon's Death with Dignity Act, was passed on 4 November by a majority of 59% to 41%. It will allow doctors to prescribe a lethal dose of drugs for mentally competent patients with less than six months to live.

Patients will have to be residents of the state and will have to go through a 15 day waiting period after asking for the lethal dose. They will then have to make the request again, orally and in writing. If the doctor thinks depression might be clouding the patient's judgment, the patient must be referred to a mental health professional. Two doctors must approve any request, and patients must administer the drugs themselves.

Since Oregon's law came into effect 11 years ago, 341 people have used it to end their lives.

A study last month in the *BMJ* found that three of a sample of 18 patients who received a prescription for assisted suicide in Oregon were depressed at the time (2008; 337:a1682, doi: 10.1136/bmj.a1682). One of the three had her depression treated before she took the lethal dose.

The researchers accept that the requirements of the Death with Dignity Act would be satisfied if the depression was detected by the doctor but not considered to influence the patient's ability to make an informed choice. But they say that this may not be easy to determine and call for better screening.

Physician assisted suicide is also legal in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland. About 100 Britons have travelled to Switzerland, which has no requirement of residency, to end their lives.

There is the risk of prosecution in the UK for people who help relatives make the trip to Switzerland to commit suicide.

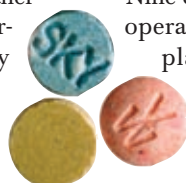
See Letters p 1127.

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drug problems with a surge in supplies from Afghanistan

for cannabis to be produced in Europe rather than imported from Africa or Latin America and warns that the home grown variety is often far more potent.

It also indicates that overall consumption may be stabilising. Although the United Kingdom had the highest levels of use in the early and mid-1990s, a downward trend has recently been observed, especially among 16 to 24 year olds.



Nine countries of the European Union operate full smoking bans in public places, and a further five have partial restrictions, the Lisbon based centre notes: “The possible link between tobacco policies and cannabis smoking is an issue meriting attention.”

Heroin remains at the centre of Europe's drug problem, particularly with a surge in

supplies from Afghanistan. Mr Götz warned that the slow improvements seen in recent years seem to be stalling. “Current signs lead us to conclude that the situation is not getting better and may even be getting worse in some aspects,” he said.

2008 Annual Report: The State of the Drugs Problem in Europe is at www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/annual-report/2008.

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