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April 2001

Health in the news

Healthcare was not as dominant a theme in the budget as was the case last year, when the Chancellor promised NHS spending would grow by 6.1% every year for the next four years. Nevertheless, a substantial increase in funding was again announced – see ‘Budget boost for NHS’.

There have also been other encouraging stories in the news during the past month. Figures show that the NHS performed well this winter – see ‘Coping with demand’ and a survey found that, by and large, the public likes the doctors of the NHS – ‘The British trust their doctors’.

However, doctors themselves are not celebrating. Their frequent complaints of overwork and low morale have been highlighted in a recent survey – see ‘...but doctors are not so happy’. This is despite a high-profile personal announcement from the Prime Minister of new moves intended to help GPs in their work – see ‘PM announces more funds for GP services’.

Amongst the government’s new initiatives on health has been the publication of another National Service Framework (NSF). This one dealing with the care of the elderly – see ‘Care of the elderly: a new blueprint’.

Health concerns which rightly retain their place in the news headlines include coronary heart disease (see ‘New studies on heart disease’) and tobacco-related disease (see ‘The drive to cut smoking’). vCJD also remains a worry, but at least a new study may just help towards a fuller understanding of how the disease is transmitted – see ‘vCJD cluster blamed on butchery practices’.

Budget boost for NHS

Chancellor Gordon Brown announced in his budget speech that the NHS would be receiving a further £1bn over the next three years. Secretary of State for Health Alan Milburn later announced details of how the £835m which will go to the NHS in England will be spent. Every acute NHS trust in the country will receive up to £1.5m each year during that period, and a £135m fund will be set up to recruit more ‘front-line’ staff. There will also be more money for GP services.

Healthcare workers have welcomed the increased funding but Christine Hancock, General Secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, commented, ‘Pay is still a key factor in improving nurse recruitment and we’d like to see this new money targeted at continuing the trend of above-inflation pay increases.’ Stephen Thornton, Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation said, ‘This is good news for many of our ageing hospitals... It will also enable hospitals to invest in much needed new medical equipment.’ He added, however, ‘Our only disappointment is that the cost of tobacco products is only rising in line with inflation, remembering that smoking is one of this country’s biggest killers.’ Sir George Alberti, President of the Royal College of Physicians said, ‘These are steps in the right direction, but many more steps will be needed before we have a health service of which we are proud.’

This year’s rise in NHS funding follows the Chancellor’s pledge a year ago that there would be big increases over the next four years. Last year he announced that funding for the NHS in the year 2000–2001 would rise to £54.2bn – £2bn more than previously planned.

Tax credits for research and development companies were also announced in the budget, a move welcomed by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry.

• Press release (DoH), BBC Online

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PM announces more funds for GP services

Tony Blair has announced that new incentive schemes will be negotiated between NHS primary care groups and

trusts and GP surgeries. £5,000 will be paid 'up-front' to help practices provide improved service, with a further £5,000 paid at the end of the year to those which meet locally agreed incentive targets. There will be incentives for GPs who choose to work in deprived areas. Doctors who have left general practice will be offered £5,000 to return, and GPs who are planning to retire early at 60 will be offered a £10,000 investment bond to encourage them to stay on to 65.

In a speech to the Royal College of General Practitioners, he also announced that from May there would be a national director for primary care services. Dr David Colin-Thomé will be the first holder of the post. His role will be similar to that of the recently appointed directors for cancer, heart disease, mental health, and the elderly.

According to the *Health Service Journal*, senior staff in the DoH were not made aware in advance of the Prime Minister's announcement and that, in consequence, the scheme has yet to be worked out in detail. NHS managers say they face a huge task in designing the new incentive arrangements. The BMA says that £5,000–10,000 per practice is not enough to implement the modernisation reforms which the government is demanding.

A constant complaint of GPs has been that paperwork has increased in recent years to the point that it threatens to overwhelm them. The government is seeking to address this concern. Health minister John Denham said changes would be introduced regarding the number of forms GPs had to sign. To give just one example, hospital doctors will no longer refer patients back to their GP in order to get a sickness certificate. The minister estimated the changes would save GPs 750,000 hours of form filling a year – equivalent to seven million appointments with patients.

The response from the BMA has been described as 'guarded'. The association has reservations about cash incentives as they could act to increase pressures on overworked and demoralised GPs, leading to more cases of 'burn out' and early retirement.

• *Health Service Journal* 22nd March, Press release (DoH), BBC Online, *BMJ* 24th March

The British trust their doctors

An opinion poll of nearly 2000 people has found that the British public still trust doctors and are satisfied with the services they receive from them.

The survey, conducted by MORI for the BMA, found that 89% of people thought that doctors told the truth;

judges scored 78%, journalists 18% and politicians 17%. Eighty-nine percent of people were either satisfied (53%) or very satisfied (36%) with the way doctors did their jobs. Only nurses (95%) scored more highly in this regard. The only area of some concern was that a significant minority (35%) of respondents felt doctors paid too little attention to feelings. Hospitals as institutions fared worse than doctors; 59% said that the people running hospitals paid too little attention to the rights and feelings of patients.

BMA Chairman, Dr Ian Bogle, said, 'I am delighted with these results. It shows that you should trust the public to make mature judgements based on their own experience. Patients read about high-profile cases but ... they know doctors are doing a good job in difficult circumstances.'

• *BMJ* 24th March

...but doctors are not so happy

A national survey of doctors has found that most of them believe patient care has declined since Labour came to power. Almost 75% of 1333 doctors questioned, on behalf of the *Sunday Times*, said they thought the extra billions spent on the NHS were not getting through to provide better services and that the NHS was in a worse state than four years ago. One doctor said, 'It's not a problem of money; it's the way it is spent.'

A majority of those questioned were gloomy about the proposals outlined in the NHS Plan. Only 15% said their morale was good. The figure in a similar survey in 1997 was 34%. Over 80% said they believed the recent pay rises for doctors would do nothing to slow the continuing exodus from the medical profession. Personal complaints registered by doctors on the survey form included comments that excessive bureaucracy and continuing reforms swallowed most of their time.

Seventeen per cent of the respondents described themselves as Labour supporters but only 11% said they were Conservatives. The Lib Dems emerged as the most popular with the doctors in the survey, 20% of whom supported the party.

Meanwhile, the BMA says it is taking legal advice regarding the government's intention to ban NHS consultants from taking on private work until they have worked exclusively for the health service for at least seven years. The BMA argues that the proposed restriction, seen as being at the heart of reforms planned for consultants' contracts, is illegal.

• *Sunday Times* 25th March, *BMJ* 3rd March

Coping with demand

The Chief Executive of the NHS, Nigel Crisp, has announced the results of a survey showing the health service coped more effectively this year with the increased demands of winter. Despite low levels of flu, the NHS was just as busy as in previous years but it nevertheless managed to achieve a 75% reduction in the number of patients who had to wait 12 hours or more for admission to hospital. The number of cases where hospitals had to transfer critically ill patients because they had no beds fell by 19%. In 14 of the 17 winter weeks the NHS coped with more emergency admissions than last year. More patients were treated at home and more use was made of spare capacity in the private sector. The Prime Minister commented that the report 'on the whole makes encouraging reading'.

The latest figures on NHS waiting lists show that the number of people waiting for in-patient treatment increased in January, the second month in a row there has been a rise. However, a rise is expected at this time of year. The government argues that the January increase of 4,500 patients is 'minimal' and that it is still on track for meeting its waiting list targets. Last January the in-patient waiting list rose by 11,000. Health secretary Alan Milburn says the next step is to 'tackle cancelled operations head on'. Such cancellations have increased in the health service in recent months. He announced that the 'cancelled operations standard' proposed in the NHS Plan would now be piloted in nine hospitals. This means they must now offer any patient whose operation has been cancelled another operation within 28 days. If they fail to do so, they must then pay for the patient's treatment at another hospital of the patient's choice, which may be a private hospital.

- BBC Online Press releases (DoH)

Care of the elderly: a new blueprint

The latest NHS 'national service framework' (NSF) was published in March. This NSF deals with older people and outlines national standards to improve the quality of care that they receive. Health secretary Alan Milburn said, 'This is the biggest national effort there has ever been to improve healthcare for older people. These tough new national standards will root out age discrimination. Older people should be treated according to their clinical needs, not their age. We are putting in extra money, new services and 10,000 more staff to ensure that older people

wherever they live get the highest standards of care.' He announced £120m additional funding to help implement the measures in the NSF. This will allow, over the next three years, refurbishment of older wards to improve standards of dignity and privacy. Implementation of the framework will be overseen by Professor Ian Philp, National Director for Older People's Services. In addition to the question of discrimination, the NSF sets standards on: person-centred care, intermediate care, general hospital care, stroke, falls, mental health, and promoting a healthy life. The NSF may be seen in full on www.doh.gov.uk/nsf/folder/olderpeople.htm.

The Secretary of State has also announced that the next NSF will deal with long-term health conditions.

Meanwhile, the government has come under fire from the proprietors of private care homes for the elderly. More than 70% of the residents of such homes have their care paid for by the state, but the National Care Homes Association says the rates being paid are not enough to allow them to provide an adequate service. The Association believes the situation will worsen now that the government has introduced new minimum standards for the homes, which include ensuring that all staff are properly qualified and that residents are given a measure of choice as to how they spend their days. The NCHA says many homes have already been forced to close because of the low level of their fees and many more will soon follow.

- Press release (DoH), BBC Online

Scotland: health news round-up

Hospitals in Scotland are failing to invest adequately in medical equipment, according to a report from the Auditor General for Scotland. Under-funding of around £8m was identified in 1997-98. Although the report acknowledges that figures for one year need to be treated with caution, it adds, 'Our survey findings suggest that across Scotland, expenditure on new and replacement medical equipment is failing to match depreciation and that trusts are not replacing items of medical equipment when they come to the end of their useful lives.' The report also says that more than 40% of health trusts had no formal training policies for using medical equipment. This is seen as a matter of concern, because Medical Devices Agency figures show that patients are 3-10 times more likely to be at risk from error by users than from faulty equipment. The report is available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk.

Doctors in Scotland are calling for security guarantees over plans to put patients' health records on an NHS intranet system. Scotland will be the first part of the UK to take part in the experiment, which will involve doctors, pharmacists and patients. Scottish health minister Susan Deacon plans to phase in the system by 2003. It could lead to patients carrying their health records on a 'smart card'. Critics of the plan claim that computer hackers could gain access to highly confidential information if the scheme goes ahead. Dr Kenneth Harden, Chair of the Scottish GP committee of the BMA, said that doctors would not hand over records unless their security could be guaranteed and patients had given their consent. The Scottish Executive has assured GPs that it will not introduce the system until it is convinced it is 'totally secure'.

A cluster of childhood leukaemia cases seen on Scottish islands during World War II could provide a clue as to how the disease develops. Research by Cancer Research Campaign (CRC) scientists shows that in Orkney and Shetland during the war leukaemia cases were 3.6 times average rates. A large contingent of servicemen lived on the islands at that time. The incidence rate fell back to the Scottish average after the war. Professor Leo Kinlen, from the CRC, said, 'Increases like this have been found in other situations where there's been a mixing of populations within rural areas. It all strongly suggests that an infection plays an important role in leukaemia.' The CRC says the study provides further evidence that a mystery infection, probably a virus, is one of the factors responsible for childhood leukaemia. Professor Gordon McVie, Director General of the CRC said, 'We're now a step closer to the ultimate goal of leukaemia research, which is to track down the nature of the infection and develop vaccines against it.'

Members of the Scottish Parliament have called for the creation of an expert committee to carry out further research into the controversial measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine. A report by the parliament's health committee concluded that there was no reason to doubt the safety of the triple injection. It said that, on current evidence, there was no scientific link between autism and the triple vaccine. However, the committee acknowledges there were still many unanswered concerns and it has called for the creation of a working group, which would report back within six months.

- *BMJ* 17th March, BBC Online

Health in Wales

The Welsh NHS plan, 'Improving Health in Wales', (see *Health Insight* March) stresses there is a secure future for the network of major acute hospitals in the principality.

Addressing the National Assembly recently, health minister Jane Hutt said, 'My vision for the future is not about getting rid of what we have now. It is not about centralising services and forcing patients to travel longer distances. It is about the organisation of clinical services to achieve the best balance between easy and fair access and the sustainability of good quality clinical practice.' Helping to implement the new plan will be Ann Lloyd who has been appointed the new NHS director in Wales. Ms Lloyd is a former chief executive of Frenchay Healthcare NHS Trust in Bristol.

Latest figures show a continued fall in the number of patients waiting for treatment in Wales. The number of patients waiting for their in-patient/day case treatment fell by nearly 6,000 during the month of February, and those waiting for their first out-patient appointment fell by almost 1% during the month.

- *BMJ* 3rd March, Press release (The National Assembly of Wales)

New studies on heart disease

The number of people in the UK suffering from angina is now more than two million. Angina is the most common symptom of coronary heart disease. It can lead on to heart attacks, or the necessity for a heart bypass operation. A study for the British Heart Foundation (BHF) shows there are 330,000 new angina cases diagnosed each year, and 750,000 people living in the UK with heart failure. The BHF data also show, however, there has been a steady rise in the likelihood of surviving a heart attack – 1.3 million people living in the UK have done just that. Although this is good news, it has serious cost implications. Coronary heart disease currently costs the UK £10bn a year. Health Secretary Alan Milburn, has recently announced that £60m is to be invested to expand and improve heart surgery, and an additional £5m to extend the number of rapid access chest pain clinics.

More details can be seen in the BHF's *Morbidity Supplement 2001*, compiled by the foundation's health promotion research group at the University of Oxford Institute of Health Sciences – www.dphpc.ox.ac.uk/bhfhprg.

The welcome news to men taking the anti-impotence drug Viagra is that it will not put them at an increased risk of a fatal heart attack. Scientists from the Drug Safety Research Unit in Southampton say the drug has passed initial safety tests, but further research is needed. Researchers sent questionnaires to GPs about the experiences of more than 5,000 men who had taken Viagra. After analysing the data, they found only 10 men had died –

six had suffered heart attacks and four died following ischaemic heart disease. Peter Barker, coordinator of the Men's Health Forum, said they hoped the research would encourage the government to relax restrictions on who could and could not be prescribed the drug.

Researchers from London have concluded that prolonged breastfeeding could increase a child's risk of developing heart disease in later life. The team, from the MRC Childhood Nutrition Research Centre at the Institute for Child Health in London, studied 331 adults aged 20–28, born at the Cambridge Maternity Hospital between 1969 and 1975. Results showed that prolonged breastfeeding was linked to the stiffening of the arteries, which is an early symptom of cardiovascular disease. Subjects studied who had been breast-fed for longer than four months as babies had stiffer arteries than those who had been breast-fed for less than four months, or who had been bottle-fed. Every extra two months of breastfeeding also led to a rise in cholesterol levels and blood pressure. Professor Alan Lucas, Director of the Research Centre, said it was possible that breastfeeding stimulated the body to retain more cholesterol. He stressed, however, that, 'The public health message is to deal with the Western style diet rather than breastfeeding, which has so many advantages.'

- BBC Online, Press release (DoH)

The drive to cut smoking

In another government move to persuade Britain's 13 million smokers to give up, nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) products are to be given on prescription. The DoH believes the offer will prove cost-effective through reducing the £1.4bn annual burden on the NHS of treating people with smoking-related diseases. Research has shown that NRT can double the success rates of stopping smoking, compared with willpower alone.

The government is also backing European Union directives to cut tar levels in cigarettes. Maximum tar yields in cigarettes will be cut, as will those of nicotine and carbon monoxide. Misleading descriptions on cigarette packets, which suggest that some tobacco products are safer than others, will be banned in future. This directive strengthens health warnings on tobacco products to include references to passive smoking, ageing of the skin, and impotence.

An anti-smoking advert with a difference is appearing on British TV screens. The advert, which compares cigarettes to serial killers, was designed by teenagers, for teenagers, in a competition organised by the Cancer Research Campaign (CRC) and Get-Into, a company which aims to create opportunities for young people. The CRC

estimates about 450 children aged 11–19 start smoking every day; about 21% of boys and 25% of girls aged 15 are addicted to cigarettes. One competition winner said, 'In the past adults have designed the adverts. But if someone your own age is doing it, it will have more chance.'

Given these positive moves, it is hardly surprising that health campaigners are angry that, in the budget, Chancellor Gordon Brown decided that the duty on tobacco would not be increased by more than the rate of inflation, resulting in a rise of just 6p in the cost of a packet of 20 cigarettes. Professor Gordon McVie, Director General of the CRC, said, 'We are disappointed that the government has decided against a greater-than-inflation rise in tobacco taxes, as we know from our own evidence that higher taxes help people quit... with 300 people dying every day in the UK from tobacco-related disease it would have been a life-saver.'

- *Sunday Times* 11th March, BBC Online, Press release (DoH)

Mental health moves

Health Minister John Hutton has launched the results of a major research study into mental health discrimination. This marks the first stage of the government campaign, 'Mind out for Mental Health'. Research concentrating on the youth element of the campaign, was carried out in partnership with the National Union of Students and the National Schizophrenia Fellowship. The results show that, although young people are largely ignorant of what constitutes mental health problems, they still have discriminatory attitudes.

Another report published recently shows that more than a fifth of suicides among people with mental illness could have been prevented. About a quarter of the UK's 6,500 suicides each year occur among people with mental illness, some 12% of them while in hospital. The National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness found that many people at risk of suicide were simply slipping through the net. A quarter of those who committed suicide died within three months of being discharged from hospital, nearly half of them never making it to their first follow-up appointment. Nearly 50% of suicides were among people being supervised, but half of them were not taking their medication when they died, or had missed their last appointment with community services. Professor Louis Appleby, director of the inquiry, said the figures (from 1999) suggested that the fall in the suicide rate among the general population, which has been observed since the beginning of the 1990s, was continuing. However, suicide rates among people with mental illness have remained static. Mental illness also

contributes to about a third of the 600 murders in the UK each year. Less than 10% of those accused of homicide in England and Wales, however, had been in contact with mental health services in the previous year. The report can be seen on the DoH website – www.doh.gov.uk/mentalhealth/safetyfirst.

- Press releases (DoH), *BMJ* 17th March

Modernisation team 'not a hit squad'

Representatives of the NHS Modernisation Agency have endeavoured to assuage fears within the health service that it will adopt a punitive approach towards poorly performing organisations. Speaking at a conference organised by the New Health Network, senior staff of the new agency said such organisations would be regarded as 'challenged' rather than as 'failing'. The agency would seek to work with hospitals and 'not do things to them'. Nevertheless, through focusing on service improvement and leadership development, the agency would aim to boost performance across the health service. Its four key themes would be 'courage, confidence, coherence and clarity'.

Since the announcement, in the NHS Plan, of the establishment of the agency, there have been fears that its approach would mirror that of the OFSTED agency, whose draconian school inspections have come under fire from teachers.

- *Health Service Journal* 15th March

TB: vaccination restarts

Public health minister Yvette Cooper has announced the resumption of routine BCG vaccination against tuberculosis in all schools. Routine vaccination was suspended in September 1999, when suppliers said they had manufacturing problems. Ms Cooper said, 'We know that parents have been concerned about the health of their children while the programme has been suspended. This is why we have remained committed to restarting the programme as soon as possible. Every effort will be made to vaccinate all of the children who have missed out on the BCG vaccine since September 1999.' The Conservatives allege the government has been complacent in allowing the programme to be suspended for so long.

The latest global statistics on TB have just been published, showing a rise in many parts of the world. There

were 797 new cases in the UK in 1999, up from 270 in 1994. The charity TB Alert has called on the government to do more to combat the resurgence of the disease in the UK and worldwide.

- Press releases (DoH, TB Alert), BBC Online, *Global Tuberculosis Control 2001* (World Health Organisation)

Hopeful research

The Royal Marsden Hospital is pioneering a technique that could prevent some cancer patients losing their limbs. With certain tumours, an arm or a leg has to be amputated to halt the spread of the disease. The use of chemotherapy to shrink such tumours is normally considered not to be an option because it would damage vital organs. However, specialists at the hospital have now treated 12 patients with chemotherapy after having cut off the blood supply to the affected limb, so the chemotherapy drugs do not reach the rest of the body. The tumours, all previously considered to be inoperable, have all been totally or partially destroyed, with no adverse effects elsewhere. The technique, known as isolated limb perfusion, involved the use of a by-pass machine so that the tissues of the isolated limb receive oxygen during the treatment.

Another hopeful cancer research project is examining the potential human use of a compound first developed for the treatment of animals. London vet John Carter created the compound, CV247, for use with cats and dogs, with which it has been very successful. Animals have been brought to his Harrow clinic from across the UK. CV247 is now being tested at Bedford Hospital on 40 patients with advanced cancers of the prostate, colon and ovary.

- BBC Online

Hepatitis C compensation case

The NHS faces a bill for compensation that may reach £7m, following a test case in the High Court. Mr Justice Burton ruled that 114 people, who became infected with hepatitis C virus after receiving blood transfusions or blood products, should receive payments. For the six 'lead cases' under consideration the payments ranged from £10,000 to £210,000.

The judgement has been hailed as a landmark decision. It is the first multi-party action to go to court under the Consumer Protection Act 1987. A second case, involving nine people some of whom are haemophiliacs, will come

to court in May. Meanwhile, however, the NHS has appealed against the judge's decision.

- BBC Online

Taking errors seriously

Medical errors continue to dominate the newspaper headlines and now a leading figure in the medical establishment has urged doctors to 'get serious' about the problem. Professor Sir George Alberti, President of the Royal College of Physicians, in an editorial in the *BMJ* stresses that medical errors have always happened. There have been few serious attempts to establish how common they are, so it is difficult to establish whether or not they are increasing, but one recent study in London found that almost 11% of patients in two acute hospitals suffered a 'preventable adverse event'.

Professor Alberti says the problem cannot be ignored and calls for a national system for the recording of adverse events. He says that the medical profession can learn a lot from the procedures of airlines, which he says spend a much higher proportion of revenue on training than does the NHS. Pilots are required to report all adverse incidents, but 'blame' is minimised.

- *BMJ* 3rd March

Lib Dems on health

Healthcare featured prominently in the 'alternative budget' launched in March by the Liberal Democrats. The fully-costed budget promises big increases in pay for the lowest paid staff in the NHS; more doctors, nurses and beds; and free long-term personal care.

Party health spokesman Nick Harvey said the NHS Plan was 'in the right direction of travel' but was not sufficiently ambitious on health. The extra funding needed to implement the Lib Dems plans would come from further cuts in 'unnecessary bureaucracy' and from a new top tax rate of 50p in the pound on incomes over £100,000.

- *Health Service Journal* 8th March

Power lines and cancer: a weak link

The National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) has ruled out electricity power lines as a possible cause of

cancer in adults but has concluded that there is a weak statistical association with childhood leukaemia.

In its analysis, the NRPB included data from the UK Childhood Cancer Study, the world's largest case-control study on childhood cancer, in which no such link was found, but the NRPB also included data from other studies in the UK and overseas. The board concluded that in the general population the risk of a child under 15 developing leukaemia was 1 in 1,400 but in households where there were high levels of electromagnetic fields the risk was roughly doubled. About 0.5% of UK homes experience high level electromagnetic fields.

NRPB Chairman Sir Walter Bodmer said, 'The evidence doesn't only relate to power lines, it's down to the effects of electrical power around the house. The evidence is weak, but it's the responsibility of a body like ours to state the scientific case as it is, and leave policy making to the government.' Pressure groups are calling for the government to act to reduce the possible risk, pointing out that in the US there is legislation preventing the building of new homes near power lines.

- More details from the NRPB website – www.nrpb.org.uk.
- *BMJ* 10th March, BBC Online, Press Release (DoH)

vCJD cluster blamed on butchery practices

The number of 'definite and probable' cases of vCJD in the UK has now reached 95, according to the latest monthly figures issued by the DoH. A few days after the figures were released, the findings were published of an investigation into a 'cluster' of five vCJD deaths in the Leicestershire village of Queniborough. Investigators from the Leicester Health Authority focused on the preparation and selling of meat in the village during the 1980s, discounting various other possibilities which had been suggested – surgery, water supply, baby foods, or workplace risks. They concluded it was 'plausible and possible' that traditional butchery practices still in use in the area in the 1980s were to blame.

Dr Philip Monk, a consultant in communicable disease control, said the most likely scenario was that those who died purchased meat from the four local butchers where it was common practice for the heads of slaughtered cows to be split open so the brain could be removed. Small amounts of brain material, containing the infectious prion agent, would then have been able to contaminate the meat. The practice was regarded as a legitimate part of traditional butchery, though it had already become uncommon by the 1980s and was banned altogether in

1989, soon after BSE was first recognised in cows.

The Leicester team have called for their hypothesis to be investigated nationally. Professor Roy Anderson of the government's Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee described the hypothesis as 'a very plausible' explanation, and the DoH has also welcomed publication of the report. However, Professor Richard Lacey of Leeds University, who first suggested the link between BSE and vCJD, dismissed it as 'pure speculation'. The Leicester report may be seen on the Leicester Health Authority website – www.leics-ha.org.uk.

Three people died of vCJD in Queniborough within 12 weeks in 1998 and there have been two further deaths since then. The victims were aged 19–35.

Meanwhile, the DoH has published a report as part of its strategy to reduce the theoretical risk of transmission of vCJD through surgery. *Risk assessment for the transmission of vCJD via surgical instruments* may be seen on www.doh.gov.uk/cjd/riskassessmentsi.htm. And an American scientist, Stephen DeArmond of the University of California in San Francisco, has suggested that inflammation of the throat (particularly tonsillitis) might be responsible for allowing the infectious prion to pass into the human body.

• Press release (DoH), BBC Online, *The Times* 17th March

NICE approvals

Further treatments have now been endorsed by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence. The anti-obesity drug orlistat (Xenical) has been approved for use, but only for those whose weight is considered to be a serious medical problem. Patients should also be able to demonstrate that they are committed to losing weight and, in the month before they start treatment, have lost at least 2.5kg using diet and exercise alone. Orlistat, manufactured by Roche, works by reducing the absorption of fat through the gut. NICE says most patients should come off the drug in less than a year, and none should take it for more than two years. Obesity is recognised as a growing problem, and the increased cost of the new recommendation to the NHS (estimated at £12m a year) may be offset by reducing the treatment costs of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

A new treatment drug for type 2 diabetes has also received NICE approval. Pioglitazone, manufactured by Takeda, has been recommended for use with patients who have been unable to control their blood glucose with other oral diabetic drugs. NICE says that, used in combination with other oral diabetic agents, it may be an alternative to putting such patients on insulin. However, another drug company, Novo Nordisk, says it has grave concerns – not

over the approval of pioglitazone itself, but as regards the details of the NICE guidelines which, the company says, could cause delays in prescribing insulin for those patients who really need it.

The latest work programme for NICE has also been confirmed by the DoH. It includes an evaluation of the effectiveness of new treatments for leukaemia, ovarian cancer, and 'clot-busting' in heart attacks. Surgical treatments for obesity, computerised treatment for depression and anxiety, hip resurfacing (as an alternative to total hip replacement) and photodynamic therapy for blindness due to macular degeneration will also come under the scrutiny of the institute.

• Press releases (DoH, Takeda, Novo Nordisk), BBC Online, *BMJ* 17th March

Views differ on NHS Direct

The DoH has published the results of a survey of 322 users of the nurse-led telephone helpline service NHS Direct, which is now available to callers anywhere in the UK. Nine-six per cent of callers said they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the service; 95% said they followed at least some of the advice they were given and 89% said they followed all of it. Thirty-nine per cent of those in the survey received self-care advice, 35% were advised to contact their GP, 7% to go to accident and emergency, and 3% to call a dentist.

Health minister Gisela Stuart said the service had also coped well with the extra demands of Christmas/New Year when there was a 20% rise in call numbers. (There were 190,000 calls between 23rd December and 1st January.) She said the results of the service were 'an enormous credit to the nurses and other staff who have worked to make NHS Direct such a huge success ... The number 0845 46 47 is fast becoming as familiar a number to people as 999'. She also announced a pilot scheme in the West Midlands, whereby some 50,000 subscribers to a digital TV service will be able to contact NHS Direct through their TVs.

Nevertheless, NHS Direct remains unpopular with most doctors. Writing in the *BMJ*, three doctors who are part of an out-of-hours GPs cooperative point out that studies have shown that only a minority of people have heard of NHS Direct, and that its introduction has had no impact on the use of emergency services. They say only 13% of patients using their out-of-hours service had previously contacted NHS Direct. They also argue that most callers who have called NHS Direct first should only then find it

necessary to try an out-of-hours service if they need a face-to-face consultation, but in the experience of these doctors 53% of such patients simply need advice over the phone – roughly the same proportion as they found with their other callers. They say that if NHS Direct is to have an impact it must be better marketed and must deal more effectively with the problems presented to it.

- Press releases (DoH), *BMJ* 10th March

Suicide risk for ME sufferers

The charity Action for ME (myalgic encephalomyelitis) has published what it says is the largest study on the disease – *Severely neglected: ME in the UK*. The charity, which says there are now at least 15,000 people in the UK who have ME, describes the report's findings as 'profoundly disturbing'. In particular, it highlights the fact over half of those with ME say they have felt suicidal because of their condition.

Seventy-seven per cent of the 2,338 people with ME participating in the study said they had experienced severe pain, and 70% described themselves as being sometimes or always too ill to attend a doctor's clinic. Thirty-three per cent said they had had symptoms of ME for over 18 months before it was diagnosed, and 65% said they had never received any advice from their GP as to how to manage their condition. The charity says, 'It is time those who have ME are given the type of treatment and services that the illness so clearly deserves.' It also calls for more research and for healthcare professionals to be given education about ME.

- Press release (Action for ME)

In brief

– Health secretary Alan Milburn has promised that the government will shortly publish its health inequalities targets for England. He said they would concentrate on reducing infant mortality and the number of premature adult deaths. A target for 2010 will be to reduce by at least 10% the gap in infant mortality rates between manual groups and the population as a whole. There will also be a target to reduce, by the same amount, the gap between the fifth of health authorities with the lowest life expectancy and the population as a whole.

- Press release (DoH)

– Over 80,000 children in 510 schools across England are now receiving a free piece of fruit each school day, in the biggest government programme to improve child health and nutrition since the introduction of free school milk in 1946. The National School Fruit Scheme, the first government-funded scheme of its kind in the world, will give all four to six-year-olds in infant and nursery schools a free piece of fruit each day by 2004. The scheme follows research which shows that eating at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day could help to prevent diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and asthma. It is considered to be the second most effective strategy in preventing cancer after reducing smoking.

- Press release (DoH)

– More people die in the home every week than in road accidents, according to a government report. In the UK, 76 people are killed in domestic accidents each week – mainly from fires, carbon monoxide poisonings, burns, drowning, accidental collisions, and DIY accidents. Road accidents kill 66 people a week. Sarah Colles, home safety advisor for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, said, 'It is worrying to see that so many people are still being needlessly injured in the home each year.' She said vulnerable groups such as young people and children needed to be targeted to reduce the number of accidents in the future: 'Home safety is everyone's responsibility and we should work together in a bid to raise home safety awareness.'

- BBC Online

– The public is being asked for its views on the implications of the way genes may determine certain human traits, such as aggression, antisocial behaviour, alcoholism, homosexuality and intelligence. In a consultation document, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics says complex issues are being raised by the drive to uncover links between genetic makeup and human behaviour. Depending on how the discussions with the public develop, the working party responsible for the consultation may produce guidelines for researchers in the field, and launch a campaign to help explain the issues to the public. Information about the working party and some of the main issues is available on www.nuffieldfoundation.org/bioethics.

- *BMJ* 24th March

– A major conference on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has been held in London – the first main European conference on ADHD since the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) issued its guidelines on the controversial drug treatment Ritalin last October. NICE ruled that the drug could be prescribed

on the NHS to children who were diagnosed as having serious hyperactivity problems. About 5% of school children in England and Wales are thought to be suffering from ADHD.

- BBC Online

- The supermarket Sainsbury's has announced that it has developed a process, which will kill bacteria on raw chicken, making it safer to eat. Sainsbury's claim the new unique system, which washes the chicken in hot water for a specific length of time, will reduce *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* by 95%, without destroying the taste of the meat. Customer trials will now be carried out. In 1999 more than 20,000 cases of *Salmonella* poisoning were reported. A spokesman for the Food Standards Agency said it welcomed any moves to try to improve the safety of food.

- BBC Online

- April is National Bowel Cancer Month in the UK. Bowel cancer is the third most common form of cancer in the UK - 17,000 people died from it in 1998. The Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF) commissioned a survey about people's toilet habits to coincide with the launch of the initiative. The poll found that people were as uncomfortable about discussing bowel problems with their family doctor as they were about talking about sexual problems. Nine out of 10 cases of bowel cancer can be treated effectively if the disease is caught early enough, but many people leave it too late to seek treatment.

- BBC Online

- The first baby to be conceived from an egg that was frozen and then thawed has been born in the UK. The child, which has been described as 'healthy' was created from an egg donated by one woman, frozen and stored before being fertilised, and placed in a second woman's womb. The procedure was carried out at the Assisted Reproduction & Gynaecology Centre, one of seven clinics in the UK to be licensed to freeze eggs by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA). A spokesman for HFEA said it had decided in January 2000 that enough babies had been successfully born using the technique to license it in the UK, though he warned it still had quite a low success rate.

- BBC Online

- During 2000, 113 nurses, midwives or health visitors were struck off the professional register, compared with 74 the previous year. Data from the UK Central Council for Nursing Midwifery & Health Visiting (UKCC) also show a rise in complaints against nurses, full misconduct hearings, and cautions following findings

of wrongdoing. Most of the complaints were lodged by employers or managers. A UKCC spokesman said that compared with the number of nurses on the register (634,000) the number of complaints was still very small: 'We do not believe the rise in complaints reflects a fall in standards within the profession. It is more likely to reflect a change in society, where people are less prepared to accept bad practice when it occurs, which is a good thing.'

- BBC Online

- Mumps may be making a comeback, the Public Health Laboratory Service has warned. There were 654 confirmed cases in England and Wales last year, up from 358 in 1999 and 121 in 1998. A major factor could be the decline in vaccination rates, as a result of public concern over the safety of the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine. Specialists have warned that mumps can have serious complications, and have once again urged parents to get their children vaccinated.

- BBC Online

- The DoH is to launch a new study into the causes of autism, at a time when there have been concerns that the condition may be becoming more common. The research will be conducted in collaboration with the Medical Research Council. It will be overseen by psychiatrist Professor Eve Johnstone of the University of Edinburgh. It is intended to take a much broader look at possible causes than has been done in previous studies. The first step will be to hold a series of meetings over the next few months involving doctors, scientists, the National Autistic Society and other interested parties.

- BBC Online

- A select committee of the House of Lords has accused the Medicines Control Agency of not dealing with cannabis-based medicines in the same impartial manner that it deals with other medicines. The committee is particularly concerned that MCA's insistence on the need for further toxicological data could prevent or delay the approval of new cannabis-based treatments for multiple sclerosis.

- *BMJ* 24th March

- An all-party group has been set up in the House of Commons to address the issue of men's health. Its first action will be to back a campaign by the Men's Health Forum to do more to tackle the problem of suicide in young men - in whom the suicide rate has risen by 55% in the last 20 years. Men now live on average five years less than women and the reluctance of men to seek medical treatment at an early stage is seen as a major

factor. Dr Ian Banks, President of the Men's Health Forum, described men's health as, 'a major inequality issue, particularly for those men in social classes four and five and some ethnic minorities'. He said he wanted to see the all-party group get the issue on to the government's agenda.

- BBC Online

– A GP practice in Derbyshire and another in Oxford became the first pilots of a scheme to allow NHS patients to have direct on-line secure access to their own medical records. Patients at the two surgeries are now able to sit in a private place and view their records on a computer. In Oxford they will be able to see all their records over the last four years, in Derbyshire they will see only a summary but any new additions will be available in full. It is planned to extend the scheme to the entire NHS by 2004.

- Press release (DoH)

– The BMA's GP committee has called for a radical rethink on prescribing, which it says is 'riddled with anomalies'. Amongst the issues that concern the committee are the fact that patients with some chronic conditions are eligible for free prescriptions and others are not. They would also like to see pharmacists allowed to prescribe some medicines. If, for example, they could prescribe children's paracetamol it would save money for poor families, as well as saving GPs' time. Another concern is that, many patients are now becoming more knowledgeable about drugs, thanks to surfing the internet, and they are now demanding that their doctors prescribe particular brands, in preference to generic products. If the advertising of prescription drugs were ever allowed on television, as is already the case in the US, then this pressure would increase. The committee is seeking the views of GPs across the country on such problems.

- BBC Online