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Health in the news

As the budget draws closer the chancellor Gordon Brown has been getting a grilling by the UK media. He admits that to meet patient needs the NHS must have the lion's share of public money. Will it be tax rises or increased health insurance? (see 'Our "world class" healthcare system').

Last month saw some sad cases grabbing the headlines. Two women – Diane Pretty, who is terminally ill, and an unnamed woman paralysed from the neck down – have sought legal help to let them end their lives (see 'Right-to-die cases'). A hospital in Newcastle took the parents of a small baby to court to enable them to treat her as they saw appropriate (see 'Baby in medical legal battle'); and seven women are taking three large pharmaceutical companies to the High Court over the devastating effects they claim to have suffered from the third generation contraceptive pill (see 'Contraceptive pill companies sued').

A drug for women with advanced breast cancer has at last been given approval by NICE, with the inevitable sad stories of women who have missed out because of the high cost of the drug. No sooner had the dust settled over that than leading cancer specialists were up in arms about another NICE decision (see 'NICE: continuing controversy over drugs').

Stem cell research was back in the news last month. Sadly, just as Britain looked set to become a world hub for such work, one of Dolly the sheep's scientists is taking his cloning techniques abroad (see 'Stem cell research: good and bad news').

And just as we were getting used to seeing patients going abroad for 'quick' operations Alan Milburn announces that he is inviting German surgeons over here (see 'We have ways of helping you').

Our 'world class' healthcare system

The NHS is in line for a £1bn increase in funding next year after Chancellor Gordon Brown committed the government to a publicly funded 'world class' healthcare system. In the most attention-grabbing section of his pre-budget report the Chancellor said that a 'significantly higher share of national income' would have to be spent on the NHS – seen by some as a signal of future tax rises. Mr Brown said that the NHS must meet the needs of the people of Britain and put patients first. He referred to an interim report on the future funding of the NHS, which concluded that public spending was the most efficient way of funding the service. With the report highlighting a 'decisive difference' in the level of resources devoted to health by Britain's European neighbours, Mr Brown insisted the NHS would need 'significantly' more public money.

Earlier in the month Health Secretary Alan Milburn set out the need for radical reform in the relationship between health and social care. He highlighted progress in reducing delayed discharge – so-called 'bed-blocking' – as a result of recent investment, but made clear that sustained investment in social services required breaking down the 'Berlin Wall' that divides health and social services. Speaking to a conference of healthcare professionals in London Mr Milburn said, 'I believe passionately that the right way forward is to continue investing and to press ahead with reform.'

As March drew to a close Prime Minister Tony Blair and Health Secretary Alan Milburn attended a meeting at the NHS modernisation board, in what was seen as in an attempt to show that money put into the health service was not going to waste. They outlined how the £49bn NHS budget in England and Wales was divided up over the past financial year, saying that extra health service spending helped pay for more operations, staff and drugs.

• BBC Online

NICE: continuing controversy over drugs

The breast cancer drug trastuzumab (Herceptin) has finally been given NHS approval, although it was licensed



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in the UK in June 2001. The delay in NICE's judgement has caused a storm of protest from patient groups. Many patients have been forced to pay for the treatment, which costs at least £700 a week. Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK with over 35,000 new cases diagnosed in the UK alone each year. Herceptin is given to women who have advanced breast cancer and trials suggest it can hold up the progress of the cancer, as well as improve quality of life. Approximately one in five women with advanced cancer is suitable for treatment – this can be identified by a blood test. The cost of implementing this guidance in England and Wales is estimated at £17m. A separate guidance will be issued for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Thousands of adults and children with rheumatoid arthritis will benefit from new guidance from NICE. Two new drugs for the treatment of arthritis, etanercept and infliximab may now be given as part of the management of rheumatoid arthritis in adults and children under specified conditions.

Another decision by NICE has met with outrage by leading cancer specialists. Twenty-seven experts wrote to Health Secretary Alan Milburn recently asking for a review of the decision to limit the use of the drug Irinotecan, used to treat colorectal cancer. NICE recommended that the drug should be used only as a second-line treatment for patients where treatment with an older drug for bowel cancer had failed. Dr David Cunningham of the Royal Marsden trust in London said, 'The evidence supporting the use of this drug as part of first-line treatment is very strong.'

– The Department of Health has launched a consultation into the way that topics are selected for appraisal by NICE, to ensure that the process is clearer and allows stakeholders greater involvement in the process.

• BBC Online, Press release (NICE), *Health Service Journal* 21st March

Stem cell research: good and bad news

The agency regulating work on human embryos in Britain, The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), has issued the first two licences for medical embryonic stem (ES) cell research. Teams of scientists at Edinburgh University's Centre for Genome Research and King's College London will be permitted to use cells cultured from donated surplus IVF embryos to work on treatments for illnesses like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases.

Until the law was changed last year the HFEA could only give licences to scientists for ES cell research if it

was directly linked to human fertility. In addition to finding treatments for degenerative conditions, such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, supporters of the research believe it is necessary to find ways of regenerating tissues such as nerves, muscle and cartilage to treat the elderly and disabled. Anti-abortion campaigners believe equally effective treatments could be developed using adult cells. However, scientists working in Edinburgh and Gainesville in the US, claim to have found abnormalities in the way adult stem cells behave when studied closely in the laboratory.

A further setback to Britain's hopes of becoming a world hub for stem cell medical research is the departure of one of the scientists most closely associated with attempts to commercialise the technology. Alan Colman, one of the scientists involved in cloning Dolly the sheep in 1996 is leaving the UK to work in Singapore. Dr Colman said that while UK scientists might make a breakthrough, it was hard to get the investment needed to turn those advances into real treatment for patients.

• *New Scientist* 16th March, *Guardian* 2nd, 7th March, BBC Online

Contraceptive pill companies sued

A test case involving more than 100 women who say they were exposed to potentially lethal side effects of the third generation contraceptive pill has started at the High Court. Three pharmaceutical companies, Schering Healthcare, Organon Laboratories and Wyeth are being sued in a legal challenge being brought under the Consumer Protection Act. Lawyers representing the women and their families claim that the women were not warned of the possible dangers of the pill. They claim that it caused them to develop blood clots, which led to long-term damage to their health, and in around 10% of cases proved fatal.

The case is the first of its type and, if successful, could lead to massive compensation payouts, expected to total about £10m. The litigation, involving some claims brought on behalf of women who have died, will focus on seven individual cases. Lord Brennan QC told the court the increased risk of third generation pills had featured in a major debate among epidemiology experts, as well as among regulatory authorities such as the World Health Organization.

• BBC Online

Right-to-die cases

In Strasbourg last month, Diane Pretty heard Jonathan Crow QC, representing the British government, tell the European Court of Human Rights that she has no right to

be helped to die. Mrs Pretty, who is terminally ill with motor neurone disease, wants her husband Brian to help her commit suicide – but the UK director of public prosecutions said he would not grant him immunity to prosecution in those circumstances. Mrs Pretty took her case to Strasbourg after three failed attempts in the UK to get that decision overturned – the High Court, Court of Appeal and House of Lords all rejected her arguments. At the hearing Mr Crow, said he was sorry about the ‘tragic circumstances’ of Mrs Pretty’s case. However, he said, ‘Domestic law simply does not allow one person to intervene deliberately to bring about another person’s death.’ The case ended on 19th March and a decision was not expected for at least two weeks. There is no right of appeal.

Legal history was made last month when a forty-three-year-old paralysed woman was told that she has the right to have her life support machine, which had kept her alive for more than a year, turned off. The woman, known only as Miss B, told England’s senior family judge, Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, ‘I want to be able to die’. Doctors at the hospital refused to carry out her wishes for ethical reasons, forcing her to take her case to the High Court. However, Dame Elizabeth ruled that doctors did not have the right to refuse her request and she would now be allowed to die ‘peacefully and with dignity’. The case is the first in Britain in which a patient being kept alive on a ventilator has asked for it to be switched off. In the days following the ruling the case this fact prompted massive media coverage. *The Times* ran a two-page ‘feature’, illustrated with artist’s impressions of Miss B in her hospital bed and Dame Elizabeth speaking to the Royal Courts of Justice by video link.

• BBC Online, *Guardian* 7th March, *The Times* 23rd March

Baby in medical legal battle

Early last month the media reported a case reminiscent of the Siamese twins from Malta. Fourteen-week-old Maria Aziz Al-Rafi was born with Goldenhar syndrome. She has badly disfigured facial features and partially blocked airways. The Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle-upon-Tyne won the right to decide, over and above the wishes of Maria’s parents, what course of treatment the baby needed after she suffered a seizure. Medical experts said Maria needed an urgent tracheotomy to ease her breathing difficulties but her parents were worried about the safety of their daughter. Hospital staff were forced to seek an emergency police protection order after Maria suffered acute respiratory arrest brought on by a complete obstruction of her airway. She was resuscitated and taken to pae-

diatric intensive care. At the High Court in Leeds, Maria’s parents agreed that doctors could carry out any immediate treatment to help her breathe.

Maria is now progressing well and putting on weight. She will need a lengthy series of operations to rebuild her face. Her mother wants the operations to be carried out by a leading surgeon in the US and has set up a fund to try to raise £500,000.

• BBC Online, *Guardian* 6th March

Happy birthday NHS Direct

NHS Direct was four years old on the 22nd March. Health Secretary Alan Milburn marked the day by visiting the NHS Direct site in Newcastle and setting out the next steps for the healthcare telephone service. The nurse-led helpline currently handles around 120,000 calls each week, although the call rate can increase significantly at public holidays. A report from the National Audit Office published in January confirmed earlier independent research that NHS Direct is at least as safe as other entry points into the NHS. The top ten symptoms people call the service about are: fever, abdominal pains, vomiting, rash, cough, diarrhoea, headache, cold/flu, toothache, and chest pain. Since it was launched in December 1999 four million people have visited NHS Direct Online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk). It now offers an interactive enquiry service.

• BBC Online

Latest cancer developments

– Beams of light aimed at tumour cells could increase the expected lifespan of pancreatic cancer patients. Researchers at University College London used photodynamic therapy on sixteen patients with inoperable advanced pancreatic cancer, who were not expected to live long. A drug was given to sensitise cells to the effects of light, then light precisely aimed through a fibre-optic cable placed near the target tumour, killing the cancerous cells. Surgery and radiotherapy are difficult in pancreatic cancer, because the gland is tucked away close to vital organs and blood vessels. Professor Stanley Brown, director of the Leeds Centre for Photobiology and Photodynamic Therapy said, ‘Photodynamic therapy allows a targeted approach – it can be far less traumatic than surgery. I think in the future it will be used far more to treat early cancer and pre-cancerous

conditions, as better screening picks them up.'

- A study published recently says that doctors commonly fail to spot lung cancers on patient's X-rays. This could mean cancers are not picked up at an early enough stage for surgery to be carried out – the most likely cure for the disease. Dr Peter Turkington, who co-wrote the paper, said that since the team's research, guidance for doctors on how to spot problems was more widely available. However, Dr John Harvey, a spokesman for the British Thoracic Society, said that the UK needed more lung specialists and radiologists trained to read X-rays. 'The point about all of this is that there is a need to have a chest X-ray looked at by a lung specialist.' (Also see our story about a survey carried out by the Royal College of Radiologists in the 'In brief' section.)
- The number of people dying from bowel cancer has fallen to a 10-year low, but increasing numbers are being diagnosed with the disease. Experts say increased awareness and better treatment have been key to the drop in deaths. The increase in numbers suffering from bowel cancer may be because people are living longer and there is a decline in death rates from other causes, such as heart disease and stroke. Bad diet could also be a factor. Cancer Research UK is launching a campaign, sponsored by Kellogg's Bran Flakes, to encourage people to hold healthy breakfast parties to raise money for research into bowel and other cancers.
- A panel of national experts, brought together by the British Thyroid Association, has produced the first set of evidence-based guidelines for the way thyroid cancer should be treated. 'Guidelines for the management of thyroid cancer in adults' focuses on the need for multi-disciplinary teams within each NHS region – an approach which needs to be adopted by the Regional Cancer Networks.
- Cancer Research UK, Britain's biggest cancer research charity is supporting mass genetic screening for predisposition to the disease. Research carried out at the Strangeways Research Laboratories in Cambridge suggests that many individually minor gene variations, inherited together, can multiply cancer risk. Cancer Research UK believes that lives would be saved by enabling those most at risk to be monitored more intensively and nipping early stage cancers in the bud.

• BBC Online, Press release (Royal College of Physicians), *Guardian* 4th March

We have ways of helping you

A German healthcare company, German Medicine Net, has offered to set up pre-fabricated surgery units across Eng-

land to treat more than 500,000 patients waiting for quick operations that do not require an overnight hospital stay. The radical plan has been presented by the former Labour minister, Frank Field, who told the Prime Minister that electors need persuading that the extra billions being poured into the NHS are starting to make an appreciable difference. The approximate cost of this scheme to the NHS would be £725m.

In February, German Medicine Net was named by NHS managers as the supplier of German medical teams to staff one of the new fast-track treatment centres being set up by Health Secretary Alan Milburn. A military facility is being converted into a partnership with the NHS at the Royal Hospital in Haslar, Portsmouth. It will provide conveyor belt operations such as hip and knee replacements. Patients have already been sent to spare capacity hospitals in France and Germany, now Mr Milburn is urging officials to think of moving foreign doctors to Britain, instead of asking patients to go abroad.

- Mr Milburn has announced that NHS hospitals across the country are to be invited to bid to undertake thousands of additional heart operations paid for through a new £100m fund.

• *Guardian* 4th March

Around the NHS

A website has been designed which allows medical staff to find out where the nearest spare bed in an intensive care unit (ICU) is located, so that critically ill patients can be transferred quickly. Often critically ill patients are transferred large distances at great risk to their health. Visitors to the site (www.icubeds.info) need to use a password to update the information. Each hospital is asked to submit the bed state of their ICU to the website, which is constantly updated. Other hospital units can then view a comprehensive, up-to-date list of nearby bed space. Dr John Heyworth, president of the British Association for Accident and Emergency Medicine, said, 'The system is fundamentally flawed in that throughout the country it is a frequent occurrence for ICU beds to be full. However, if you accept that is the situation then anything that minimises the risk of difficulty associated with patient transfers is to be welcomed.'

The cost to the NHS of Britain's drinking habits is as high as £3bn a year, according to a report published by Alcohol Concern. Casualty departments are jammed with drunks and victims of their violence and wards are filled with those suffering from the long-term corrosive effects of drinking, such as liver damage, cancer and heart conditions. Alcohol Concern published the report for a conference in the hopes of alerting doctors and nurses in pri-

mary care to the scale of the problem. The Department of Health said they took alcohol misuse 'very seriously' and are funding 500 treatment centres for young people in England and will run courses for doctors and nurses in recognising alcohol problems.

In what is seen as a government U-turn, Health Secretary Alan Milburn has agreed a major concession with Unison, the UK's largest trade union, allowing ancillary health staff in private finance hospitals to be NHS employers. Private firms are not happy, as they will no longer have the flexibility to dismiss staff and take on new recruits on poorer working conditions. The public services union had strongly resisted Private Finance Initiative hospital schemes because it feared they would result in worse pay, pensions and holidays.

• *The Times* 16th March, *Guardian* 1st March, BBC Online

News from Scotland...

– Eating organic food may help reduce the risk of heart attacks, strokes and cancer. A team of researchers from the Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary and the University of Strathclyde, led by biochemist John Paterson, have found that organic vegetable soups contain almost six times as much salicylic acid as non-organic vegetable soups. The acid is responsible for the anti-inflammatory action of aspirin, and helps combat hardening of the arteries and bowel cancer. The Food Standards Agency now promises to study the new evidence. 'We are aware of the suggested benefits of high levels of salicylic acid and will look at what the report has to say,' said a spokeswoman.

Children living with HIV-positive parents are suffering in silence, according to Scottish research. The three-year study, said to be the first of its kind in the UK, was carried out by the national child agency Children in Scotland and the University of Edinburgh. Children and young people in Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow were questioned for the study. Researchers asked the children what it was like to live with a parent with HIV – many of the children had already witnessed the death of one parent to HIV/AIDS. It is estimated that there has been an average of 163 new cases in Scotland every year since 1990. The report recommends that all health boards carry out an audit to identify the numbers of children and young people either using their services or accompanying their parents to health services.

Scottish health minister, Malcolm Chisholm, has announced that Scotland could have just one main body for clinical effectiveness. Consultation has formerly opened on merging three organisations, the Clinical Standards

Board for Scotland, the Health Technology Board for Scotland, and the Scottish Health Advisory Service. The move to replace the bodies with a single special health board, the Quality and Standards Board for Scotland, follows more than a year's speculation about the quality agenda north of the border. To see the background to this story visit Scotland's NHS website at www.show.scot.nhs.uk.

...and Wales

An enquiry into child protection in the NHS in Wales, headed by Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, says that children are poorly protected against the risk of abuse from their professional carers. The review was ordered in September 2000 by the Welsh health minister, Jane Hutt, after publication of Sir Ronald Waterhouse's report on abuse at north Wales children's homes. Lord Carlile said the abuse of children by NHS professionals was 'mercifully rare' but could happen. Children could best be protected by 'a culture of vigilance'. The report called for 'a complete revision of the protection of children from abuse in the NHS in Wales,' and advised 150 extra safeguards to avoid more suffering.

• *Health Service Journal* 7th March, BBC Online, *New Scientist* 14th March, *Guardian* 6th March

Appointments

- Neil McKay, the Chief Operating Officer for the NHS, has been appointed as Chief Executive Designate of Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust. Leeds is the biggest Hospital Trust in the UK.
- Heart surgeon Sir Magdi Yacoub has been selected to spearhead a government recruitment drive for overseas doctors. It is hoped that as many as 450 specialists will be recruited from abroad over the next three years to help cut waiting times for operations in the UK. Sir Magdi will help to promote the 'International Fellowship Scheme', under which overseas doctors will be able to come to work in the NHS and carry out research. Welcoming his appointment Prime Minister Tony Blair said, 'I am delighted that Sir Magdi has agreed to take up the role of Special Envoy for the NHS. We are committed to recruit more doctors into the NHS as quickly as possible.'
- Professor Carol Black has been elected President of the Royal College of Physicians. Professor Black is currently a Consultant Rheumatologist and Medical Director of the Royal Free Hospital in London. She takes over from the current President, Professor Sir George Alberti, at a New Fellows Ceremony on 25th July.

- Press release (DoH), BBC Online

In brief

- A pill to treat baldness, already available in 40 countries, is now available in the UK on private prescription. Although research found that baldness caused at least as much suffering in men as a serious skin condition such as psoriasis, the government decided Propecia, manufactured by Merck, Sharp and Dohme, would not be funded by the NHS. In clinical trials five out of six men (84%) did not lose any more hair whilst taking the drug – and some men actually reported improved scalp hair growth.
 - BBC Online
- A new campaign has been launched designed to raise awareness of tuberculosis and its symptoms. The ‘TB – Be Aware’ campaign, which highlights the symptoms and incidence of TB across the UK, will be targeted at healthcare professionals and high-risk communities. Numbers of cases have risen over the last decade as part of a worldwide resurgence of TB; across the UK 7,000 cases were reported in the year 2000. The campaign, which started on 25th March, will run for five weeks and is scheduled to coincide with World TB Day. The UK government has stated its commitment to the global TB crisis as recognised by the World Health Organization.
 - Press release (DoH)
- A children’s hospital has launched an investigation after admitting that a nurse gave a five-week-old baby a potentially lethal dose of potassium following a complex operation on his heart. Thomas Rowe, who is now in a paediatric ward at the Diana, Princess of Wales children’s hospital in Birmingham, was born with Down’s syndrome and two holes in his heart. Following surgery to repair his damaged heart valves Thomas’ heart stopped after a nurse gave him a day’s dose of the drug in one hour. A cardiac team then reopened the baby’s chest to restart his heart.
 - *Guardian* 6th March
- Prescription charges were increased from £6.10 to £6.20 on 1st April. Health minister, Hazel Blears, said, ‘For the fourth consecutive year we have held the increase to 10p. This modest increase will help maintain the contribution that charges make towards the cost of the NHS. The extensive exemption and remission arrangements we have in place mean that 85% of prescription items are dispensed free of charge.’ It is expected that prescription charges will raise some £434m for the NHS in 2002–2003.
 - Press release (DoH)
- Two studies of homeopathy, a form of complementary medicine available on the NHS, conclude that it has very little proven effect on patients. There are five homeopathic hospitals in Britain – the two largest, in Glasgow and London, have in-patient units. Many GPs either practise homeopathy themselves or refer patients to a homeopath on request; around 470,000 people take homeopathic remedies every year. The NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, based at York University, has produced a comprehensive review of the clinical trials that have been carried out to assess what benefit patients receive from homeopathy. It concludes, ‘There is currently insufficient evidence of effectiveness to recommend homeopathy as a treatment for any condition, or warrant significant changes in current provision of homeopathy. The *British Medical Journal* carried a report on a study to assess the impact of homeopathic treatment on people with asthma. Scientists found that patients given homeopathic remedies did no better than those on dummy medicines. A special report on medicine and health can be seen at the *Guardian* website www.guardian.co.uk/medicine.
 - *Guardian* 1st March
- A few eyebrows were raised last month when the British Medical Association recommended that schoolchildren as young as five should be lectured about the dangers of unsafe sex. The debate was sparked by the publication of two studies in the journal *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, which suggested that Britain was experiencing epidemic levels of STDs, fuelled by lax sexual attitudes. However, according to the UK’s Public Health Laboratory Service, gonorrhoea was four times as common in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s, syphilis is relatively rare, and genital herpes infection rates have remained flat in recent years. Even the apparent increase in chlamydia is thought to be due to better detection.
 - *New Scientist* 9th March
- Levels of obesity related diseases are growing steadily in the UK – they are estimated to cost £2bn and kill up to 30,000 people a year. Obese patients could now be helped by experiments which suggest the hormone Ghrelin can affect appetite in humans. Scientists at Imperial College, London, and the city’s Hammersmith Hospital, claim that the hormone appears to increase food consumption. Dr Alison Wren, from Imperial College, said, ‘We hope that by targeting Ghrelin with specific drugs, it may be possible to therapeutically control hunger. Professor Steve Bloom, from Hammersmith Hospital, said, ‘The advantages of this kind of therapy may extend beyond the treatment of obese patients and include conditions that induce a dangerous loss of appe-

- tite, such as cancer. In cases such as this, Ghrelin supplements could potentially help to normalise eating patterns.’
- BBC Online
- Important steps have been announced to improve healthcare for people with diabetes. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has issued two clinical guidelines for the management of type 2 (non-insulin dependent) diabetes. They cover the screening for and management of retinopathy (eye problems) and the prevention and management of renal (kidney) disease. Three remaining guidelines will be issued shortly. Following publication of the new national standards for diabetes care in December, work is now progressing on the Diabetes National Service Framework (NSF) delivery strategy, which is to be published later this year. The Diabetes NSF standards apply to England only. They are available on the Department of Health website www.doh.gov.uk/nsf/diabetes.
- Press release (DoH)
- Despite the government’s crack-down on waiting lists people are dying while waiting for radiotherapy treatment, according to a survey carried out by the Royal College of Radiologists. Hospitals are meeting the government target of getting the patients from the GP to the consultant, but then they hit a bottleneck in the system because of a shortage of radiotherapy machines and the staff to operate them. Nick James of the Institute for Cancer Studies at the University of Birmingham, who carried out the study involving more than 2,500 patients, said, ‘Undoubtedly it is costing people their lives.’ The survey of 50 patients from every cancer centre in the country found that overall people were waiting an average of six weeks for the radiotherapy treatment to begin. The government says treatment should begin within four weeks.
- *Guardian* 4th March
- The Retained Organs Commission has published a consultation document seeking views on the proper management and custodianship of human organs and tissue removed during postmortem examinations. The consultation follows a year of overseeing the practical management of measures being taken by the NHS and others, such as universities and coroners, to identify and return for respectful disposal, organs and tissue retained following postmortems.
- Press release (DoH)
- A month before Chancellor Gordon Brown’s first budget of the new parliament, research has been published which shows that cigarettes are more affordable now in the UK than they were in the 1960s, despite a decade of steep price rises. A pricing survey carried out by the World Health Organization compared the change in the price of cigarettes over the past decade with the relative change in the wealth of smokers in dozens of different countries. The report said that on average, a smoker in the UK must work for 40 minutes to pay for a pack of 20 cigarettes. Anti-smoking pressure groups believe there is scope for more tax to be levied.
- BBC Online
- The British Medical Association say motorists should be tested for drug use in the same way that they are currently tested for alcohol, as drugs – both illegal and legal – can affect the ability to drive safely. The government has responded by promising tougher powers for police to deal with people who drive under the influence of drugs. A Department of Transport spokeswoman said policemen were to be educated on drug recognition techniques, which would give them ‘greater confidence to arrest a suspect’. Dr Vivienne Nathanson, BMA head of science and ethics, said, ‘Whatever action the government takes on drug driving it is essential that it is accompanied by a public awareness campaign.’
- BBC Online
- A 102-year-old woman, Rose Cottle, has succeeded in stopping the demolition of the care village where she hoped to live out her days. She caused quite a stir when, as the figurehead for a campaign called STOP (Save The Old People), she visited 10 Downing Street with a petition bearing 5,000 signatures. The owners of Borehamwood Care Village had hoped to sell the nursing home for development into luxury homes; they will now seek a buyer to preserve the community as a care home. So, ‘The battle is won, though not yet the war’, as Miss Cottle said. She became a star overnight, receiving flowers and fan letters, and triggering off a week-long debate about the care of old people on a morning TV programme.
- *The Times* 23rd March