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August 2002

Health in the news

More than ever it seems that opinion on the state of the NHS depends on political affiliation. Health Secretary Alan Milburn was pleased with this year's NHS star ratings, saying it showed the health service was getting better. His Shadow minister thought the whole rating process was 'completely flawed', however, and others saw it as another opportunity for criticism of the NHS (see 'It's star time again').

The British Medical Association held their annual conference last month and there was much talk of stressed doctors, the fact that too many newly qualified medics are women, and the large number of refugee doctors wasting valuable time waiting to become registered (see 'Doctors in the UK'). The new president of the BMA denied any political affiliation but talked about 'third world standards' in the NHS in his speech (see 'Contentious words from the new BMA president').

The official report into the murderous life of former GP Harold Shipman was published last month. The media had obviously spent many hours preparing for this – even the broadsheet newspapers had many pages of statistics and pictures (see 'Shipman report published').

A must for the tabloid newspapers was the report about a white couple, who had undergone treatment at a fertility clinic which resulted in them having black twins. The mix-up was believed to have been human error (see 'Fertility clinics under pressure after IVF blunder').

Research scientists have been very busy lately in the UK with good news for heart disease, leukaemia, bladder cancer, asthma and AIDS (see various stories). It is particularly noticeable how genetics is playing a major role in today's research.

It's star time again

This year's NHS star ratings, which are based on more criteria than last year, showed the health service was getting better, according to Health Secretary Alan Milburn. A total of sixty-eight of England's 304 trusts received a full three stars in this year's list. All trusts were assessed on a variety of targets, including patient waiting times, deaths after surgery, cleanliness and finances. The grades will be used by ministers to decide which hospitals should be given more freedom from government control, and which should be 'franchised out' to new management teams. The tables show that standards improved in forty-seven trusts, compared with last year, but deteriorated in thirty-six. The tables also give details of the performance of specialist trusts and ambulance trusts. Mental health and community trusts were included in this year's tables for the first time, but the new primary care trusts were not given star ratings – despite being examined – since many have only been in operation since April this year. Acute trusts were congratulated by the NHS director of operations for improving their performances, despite having to meet tougher criteria.

Ministers have already announced that trusts with three stars will be able to apply for foundation status. If successful, they will be given more freedom within the NHS to set their own targets and priorities. These trusts will also receive up to £1m this year to improve patient services. In contrast, failing trusts are to be ordered to draw up urgent plans to improve their services. Most of the trusts which received no stars will have just three months to show signs of improvement or face being franchised out to a new team of managers from elsewhere in the NHS, or the private or independent sectors. Trusts where managers have already been replaced or franchised out will be given twelve months to turn their services around.

Despite Alan Milburn's confidence, opposition parties were full of criticism. Shadow Health Secretary Dr Liam Fox said, 'The whole star rating process is completely flawed. Any objective analysis would show that it is nothing more than a rag-bag of management targets which have little to do with quality of care.' Doctors, nurses and hospital managers also criticised the ratings. Dr Peter Hawker, chairman of the British Medical Association's consultants committee, said they created 'a pressure cooker atmosphere' in hospitals, and Beverly Malone, general



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secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, warned the ratings could do more damage than good by damaging morale among nurses.

• *Health Service Journal* 25th July, BBC Online, Press release (DoH)

Contentious words from the new BMA president

Doctors at the British Medical Association conference, held in Harrogate last month, were told not to expect the government to keep its promise to deliver enough extra public spending to improve 'third world standards' in the NHS. Speaking in a personal capacity Sir Anthony Grabham, the BMA's new president, said that after half a century of underfunding it was time to look at other possible ways of funding healthcare – possibly along continental lines of social insurance rather than a tax-based system. The BMA has been a strong supporter of funding the NHS from general taxation so Sir Anthony's backing for the 'insurance model' was regarded by doctors as unexpected and unorthodox. The new president, who denied any political affiliation, spoke about the UK's health services following the rule of thirds. 'One third of NHS medicine is of the highest quality,' he said, and 'the second third is reasonably good'. The last third Sir Anthony believed to be of the greatest concern. 'The well established and persistent picture of masses of patients, many of them suffering, waiting for weeks and months for initial consultations followed by further waits of weeks and months for necessary investigations is, for me, wholly unacceptable,' he said.

Sir Anthony also spoke about pressures on doctors. 'All over the country there are doctors who are anxious, stressed, overworked and demoralised because they can't look after their patients properly,' he said. He called on the government to stop manipulating the figures and start facing up to the problems in the service. Responding to his speech, a Department of Health spokesman said, 'We have a ten-year plan for investment and reform. We have more beds, more nurses and more doctors. There is some way to go, but a good start has been made.'

• *Guardian* 4th July, BBC Online

Shipman report published

The former GP Harold Shipman killed at least 215 of his patients, an official report has concluded. Shipman was convicted in January 2000 of killing fifteen of his patients with lethal heroin injections, but the report's

findings confirm him as Britain's worst serial killer. The murderer is currently serving life imprisonment for each of the fifteen original killings; Home Secretary David Blunkett had already told him that he would die in prison. The 2,000-page inquiry into the case, by High Court judge Dame Janet Smith, found that a further 200 deaths were 'highly suspicious', while there was a 'real suspicion' he could have claimed a further 45 victims. The Shipman report was covered extensively by the UK's media, *The Times* newspaper, for example, had a 7-page supplement covering every aspect of the case. It seems, however, that the 'urgent review' into death certification promised from the Home Office after Shipman's conviction has yet to be implemented, and the Patients' Association is complaining that slow progress has been made towards an effective complaints and investigation system for GPs in the wake of the murders.

• *The Times* 20th July, BBC Online

Fertility clinics under pressure after IVF blunder

A confusion of sperm, eggs or embryos, belonging to a black couple at a fertility clinic, resulted in a white couple having black twins. The blunder – the first of its kind in Britain – is expected to lead to a custody battle, which will raise complex legal and ethical issues. Neither the people involved nor the clinic can be named and a court hearing has been scheduled for October to consider the legal status of the babies. Both sets of parents are understood to want the children. The human fertilisation and embryology authority (HFEA), which is responsible for licensing IVF clinics, is examining the case. Although refusing to comment The Department of Health has also called for an investigation.

It is believed the mix-up was a disastrous human error, possibly as simple as mixing up the dishes containing the embryos. The case will cause huge concern among the 27,000 couples who use IVF treatment every year in the UK. A spokesman for the campaign group Comment on Reproductive Ethics said, 'It is to be hoped this is not just the tip of the iceberg.' Dr Sammy Lee, a scientific consultant at the Portland Hospital in London, however, said he was aware of regular mistakes at IVF clinics across the country and it was vital that training was improved for doctors working in the field of in-vitro fertilisation. 'Every day, someone somewhere in the UK is inadvertently messing up,' he said, 'but luckily the chances of it producing an obvious error of the "black twins, white twins" type is low.'

- A meeting of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology held in Vienna earlier in the month agreed that couples should be offered a way to have IVF treatment without the practice of implanting more than one embryo in the mother's womb at a time.
- *Guardian* 9th July

Drug offers heart disease revolution

Researchers say that heart attacks and strokes could be cut by at least a third by tripling the number of patients on statins (cholesterol-lowering drugs). Scientists monitored the progress over five years of more than 20,500 patients in the UK with heart or arterial disease or diabetes. They believe they have overturned conventional thinking about managing high-risk patients. The results of the study, published in the *Lancet*, are considered at least as important as those which proved aspirin to be a vital weapon against heart disease. The journal's editor, Richard Horton, said the findings should result 'in a dramatic change in clinical practice around the world'. The protective effect of statins comes on top of that offered by painkillers, and by drugs that lower blood pressure and heart rate. Taking all in combination and abstaining from or quitting smoking might reduce the risk faced by high-risk patients by as much as eighty per cent.

The £21m study, using patients from sixty-nine hospitals, was funded mainly by the Medical Research Council and the British Heart Foundation. The Department of Health said it would examine the new information.

- *Guardian* 5th July

Chance leukaemia breakthrough

A 31-year-old man, suffering from terminal leukaemia, has made a remarkable recovery after being given an injection of a mixture of stem cells from the umbilical cords of seven babies. Although a few children have been treated this way in Britain, Stephen Knox is the first adult to undergo a similar operation. The usual last-hope treatment for leukaemia sufferers is a transplant of bone marrow, which makes blood cells. It has been known for some time that blood from newborn babies' umbilical cords, normally discarded at birth, contains stem cells which could be an alternative to bone marrow. However, scientists thought that if matching cells could be found in a single cord there would not be enough to repopulate an adult marrow. In the case of Mr Knox one of the seven cords was a perfect match; the

other six were not. But instead of the body rejecting the unmatched cells, they appeared to act as boosters for the tiny number of matched ones, and Mr Knox began to recover. Professor Stephen Proctor, a consultant and leukaemia researcher at Newcastle University who carried out the procedure said, 'The transplant has worked much better and more quickly than we expected. It's a really exciting development.' The successful operation is certain to lead to calls for more publicly funded cord blood banks to be set up in the UK. At present there are only two.

- *Guardian* 9th July

And still more encouraging news

A simple urine test could revolutionise the way doctors diagnose bladder cancer. Scientists believe it could be twice as accurate in detecting tumours than the standard urine analysis currently used to diagnose the disease. The new test is based on measuring levels of a protein called Mcm5, which researchers have discovered is found at higher levels in cancer cells. It may also provide a better way of diagnosing prostate cancer, and could mean hundreds of lives are saved. Researchers carried out a trial involving 350 patients who showed symptoms of urinary tract disease such as blood in urine, or pain. Further larger scale trials are now planned; if they produce similar results, the new test could become the standard way to detect bladder cancer. The research is published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*.

Scientists at the University of Bristol believe they may have found the secret of 'switching off' the ability of cancers to spread and grow. They have been studying a molecule which is a special form of a protein called VEGF – vascular endothelial growth factor. Normally the molecule encourages the growth of new blood vessels vital to the survival and spread of a tumour. However, in the kidneys the version of VEGF was different and had the reverse effect on the growth of blood vessels. Researchers believe it could be effective against a wide range of cancers, as well as other conditions such as artery disease and diabetes. Lead scientist from Bristol, Dr Dave Bates, said, 'We are very excited about this. Theoretically it could apply to any cancer. Every cancer known uses VEGF to make new blood vessels.'

- BBC Online

This month's MMR story

The Mayor of London, Ken Livingston, infuriated doctors last month by telling parents to avoid the MMR

vaccination and choose single jabs against measles, mumps and rubella. Ian Bogle, chairman of the British Medical Association (BMA), told Mr Livingston to apologise for blundering into a sensitive area that he did not understand. Representatives at the BMA's annual conference in Harrogate, Yorkshire, were particularly annoyed when the Mayor commented in a radio interview that the government was promoting the MMR vaccine to 'save time and money' and was less concerned about effective protection.

As newly published figures from the Department of Health showed a falling uptake in the inoculation, the conference passed a resolution asking the BMA's board of science to examine compulsory immunisation. The latest figures are of particular concern as an epidemic of measles in Italy is reported to have killed three children and estimated to have infected more than 20,000. An investigation into the outbreak showed that vaccine coverage has been too low to interrupt the transmission of the infection. A consultant epidemiologist at the UK's Public Health Laboratory Service said, 'It's no surprise to us in the field that if vaccination slips, measles will come back. If this outbreak in Italy and the deaths of these poor kids has the effect of increasing uptake of the MMR vaccine in the UK, that might be a good outcome.'

• *New Scientist* 3rd July, BBC Online, *Guardian* 4th July

Significant gene discoveries

Two new important discoveries have been made lately by teams from the UK and US working together. In the first, scientists have pinpointed a gene that has been found to be a major cause of asthma in a significant proportion of cases. The research could lead to entirely new ways of diagnosing and treating asthma. At present the only way to treat the condition is to use drugs to suppress the inflammation or to dilate the constricted airways. Scientists from the UK Medical Research Council, led by Professor Stephen Holgate of Southampton University, worked with the Schering Plough Research Institute in the US. They carried out a comprehensive analysis of the genes of 460 pairs of brothers and sisters. They found that the way the lungs respond to the stimulants that can cause asthma seemed to be controlled by an area of genetic material found in chromosome 20. A newly identified gene in this area called ADAM33 plays a crucial way in making the airways of the lungs over-sensitive, thus increasing the risk of asthma. Not only could the identification of ADAM33 lead to new treatments but newborns could be genetically screened to identify the likelihood of them developing the disease. At present asthma affects one in

five children and one in ten adults in the UK; the NHS estimates the cost of treatment approaches £850m a year.

Another significant finding has been by scientists researching into HIV and AIDS. They have discovered that humans possess a gene, which acts as a defence against infection. It is hoped the discovery could lead to new treatments – badly needed as current medications become increasingly impotent. The study was carried out by Professor Michael Malim at King's College London, together with a team from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Researchers found that the HIV virus interfered with the normal operation of the gene (called CEM15) by producing a protein called Vif. However, once this protein had been removed from the HIV virus, the CEM15 gene was able to effectively stop the HIV virus from replicating. Professor Malim said, 'These are very significant findings and could open the door to new treatments for HIV/AIDS in the future.'

• *Guardian* 11th July, BBC Online

More hospital news

- Health Minister John Hutton has given thirteen NHS trusts the go-ahead to issue tenders for companies to build and provide services to the new hospital buildings under the Private Finance Initiative. This is the next step in the largest building programme in the history of the NHS, which will see over 100 new hospital schemes opened by 2010.
- The beginning of last month saw the launch of NHS Choice – a new scheme where all patients who have been waiting for more than six months for heart surgery are offered the choice of treatment at another hospital. It may not be necessary for patients waiting for heart surgery though – new figures show that for the first time since records began no-one in England is waiting more than twelve months.
- A new report suggests that hospitals are exposing patients, including babies and young children, to high levels of potentially dangerous chemicals. Researchers in the UK and US have found that medical equipment, like tubes and blood bags, may contain high levels of phthalates – a chemical that has been linked to cancer and infertility. The international lobby group behind the report – University of Liverpool Health Care Without Harm – urged officials in Europe and the US to address the issue. A spokeswoman for the UK's Medical Devices Agency said that although it was aware of concerns, at present there were no alternative products available.
- A new report from the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) says that seriously ill patients arriving at hospital should be able to move easily and safely from one part of the

hospital to the next, confident that doctors, nurses and other staff are prepared and informed about their medical condition and the treatment they have had before. In 'The Interface between Acute General Medicine and Critical Care', the RCP working party has recommended tackling the difficulties in three different ways, which put seriously ill patients at the centre of the service, instead of making them fit into existing structures.

- Press releases (RCP, DoH), BBC Online

HRT tests to carry on despite latest research

A £20m British study of the effects of hormone replacement therapy is to proceed, despite American research that found it added to the risk of breast cancer, heart disease and strokes. The Medical Research Council said it could find no ethical or scientific reasons for it to be abandoned. Five thousand British women have already been recruited for Wisdom, the Women's International Study of Long Duration Oestrogen after Menopause. They have been sent letters advising them of the findings of the US Women's Health Initiative but recommending that they continue to take part. The Wisdom project will involve 16,000 women and will run until 2012. *The Times* newspaper asked readers to email their views, asking, 'How far should such studies influence women's decisions on such treatment?'

- *The Times* 20th July, Press release (DoH)

Latest news on breast cancer

- New research suggests that if women in the UK breastfed on average for an extra six months each, a thousand cases of breast cancer – and hundreds of deaths – would be prevented each year. The study was carried out by analysts at Cancer Research UK, who pooled data from dozens of different studies into the benefits of breastfeeding. Differences in childbearing and breastfeeding habits could partly explain why rates of breast cancer are so low in the developing world. A spokesman for Breakthrough Breast Cancer said, 'This study has indicated a relationship between breastfeeding and a lower risk of cancer – but more research is necessary to clearly establish a causal link.'
- Women with breast cancer are far more likely to get speedy and satisfactory treatment than those who have other tumours. The biggest ever survey of cancer patients, carried out for the Department of Health, showed

that only nine per cent of breast cancer patients waiting more than two weeks for the results of diagnostic tests, compared with twenty-two per cent suffering from other cancers.

- The drug Tamoxifen has been enormously successful at treating breast cancer. However, not all tumours respond to the drug and some women would be better off with alternative treatments. Now scientists have discovered a key chemical switch that may allow some breast tumours to become resistant to the drug. Identifying this switch is an important step towards finding reliable ways of predicting whether the drug will be effective.
- *Guardian* 8th July, BBC Online

Alder Hey backlash

Some two years after parents discovered children's organs were being kept after their deaths at the Alder Hey children's hospital, pathologists, writing in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, have warned that valuable data on deaths in hospitals could be lost because of a decline in the numbers of autopsies performed in England and Wales. Dr Norman Carr, Dr Margaret Burke and fellow pathology advisors to the National Confidential Enquiry into Perioperative Deaths (NCEPOD) point out the problems this could cause to bereaved families as well as medical science. They also voice concerns about the coroners' rules, which limit investigations of body tissues and make a full histology report impossible, and the current lack of communication between clinicians, pathologists and coroners. The authors point out that, despite recent improvements in diagnostic techniques, the autopsy is just as vital as it has always been in helping to understand the causes of death.

In 1988/1989 forty-one per cent who had died after an operation were given an autopsy to find out vital medical information. In 1999/2000, shortly after the Alder Hey scandal broke in the national press, the equivalent figure was only thirty-one per cent. The pathologists think the situation may get worse as concerned families increasingly refuse doctors permission to keep body tissues for further examination.

- Press release (Royal Society of Medicine)

Doctors in the UK

- At their annual conference in Harrogate The British Medical Association agreed that medical schools should do more to attract male students. Women are taking sixty per cent of medical school places in the UK, rising to seventy per cent at some universities. Last year 3,355 women from the UK were given places at medical schools,

compared with 2,320 men. The BMA's medical students committee thinks one explanation is that females perform better at 'A' levels than males and suggest that universities look at alternative selection procedures that could encourage the admission of students from poorer homes and ethnic minorities.

- The conference also heard that refugee doctors are unable to get jobs in the NHS despite being highly qualified and the UK needing more medics. There are about 650 qualified doctors registered by the BMA/Refugee Council list, but only a small proportion of them are actually working. Experts estimate there could be about 1,500 medically qualified asylum seekers and refugees. Dr Edwin Borman, chairman of the BMA's International Committee said 'Training a junior doctor in the UK can cost around £200,000. Here we have refugee doctors for free, who are looking for the opportunity to contribute their skills.'
 - The service provided by Britain's GPs is highly variable across the country and could get worse if recruitment problems intensify, according to a study by the Audit Commission. Inner city areas are more likely to have fewer GPs and poorer facilities. Oxfordshire, for instance, has twice as many doctors per head of population as parts of the Northeast of England – and twice the level of funding. GP numbers are increasing, says the report, but not fast enough to meet targets set out in the NHS Plan. Two schemes aimed at boosting GP numbers and improving staff's working lives have been announced by Health Minister John Hutton. The Delayed Retirement Scheme encourages GPs to stay working longer in the NHS; the Flexible Careers Scheme, which currently only applies to hospital doctors, will offer GPs new options to work more flexibly, to work part time and to give them a route back to practice when they want to return to the NHS. The package is part of the government's drive to increase the number of family doctors in the NHS by 2,000 by 2004.
 - The Royal College of Physicians of London (RCP) has launched a new online training programme for consultant members to assist them in their continuing professional development (CPD). The College says it recognises that the internet has the potential to bring substantial benefits to doctors in their access to educational resources and has developed a pilot study in collaboration with Doctors.net.uk. Professor Parveen Kumar, Director of CPD, said, 'This is certainly the way forward for future continuing education. There are many web learning programmes but these cases have been specifically designed by our own members and fellows for the general physician.'
- Press releases (RCP, DoH), BBC Online, *Guardian* 4th July

UK bought wrong smallpox vaccine

The end of July brought worrying allegations that the UK government had bought the wrong vaccine to protect the country from the threat of a smallpox attack by terrorists, according to an independent research body, the Potomac Institute. Millions of doses of a smallpox vaccine, based on what is known as the Lister strain of the disease, were bought at a cost of £32m. In the US, the Bush administration bought a different vaccine, developed by the New York City Board of Health to combat another type of smallpox, which its scientists believe is more likely to be used by bio-terrorists. The Potomac Institute believe the UK has got it wrong. The Department of Health says it stands by its decision, which was based on advice from a committee of scientific experts. That advice, however, remains unpublished. Opposition MPs expressed concern that, unlike in America, there was no tendering process in the procedure. The Shadow Health Secretary, Dr Liam Fox called for an inquiry.

- BBC Online

In brief

- The Commons health select committee has indicated that drugs firms should be required to end their secrecy over clinical trials if they wish to get approval for widespread NHS use of their products. The MPs demanded that commercially confidential information be revealed when treatments were assessed for cost effectiveness by Nice, the national institute for clinical excellence. The move could revolutionise the way the pharmaceutical industry operates, but the committee said the change was needed to improve public credibility in the system by which the NHS determines which treatments are funded.
- *Guardian* 3rd July
- Taking vitamins to protect against disease is a waste of money, according to a report. The £21m five-year study said that millions of people taking daily doses of vitamins C and E and beta-carotene were not protecting themselves from cancer, heart problems, strokes and other potentially fatal diseases. Dr Jane Armitage from the University of Oxford's clinical trial services unit said people would be better off eating fresh fruit and vegetables.
- *Guardian* 5th July, BBC Online
- A ten-year-old girl from a village near Lancaster died after apparently swallowing up to five ecstasy tablets.

- Jade Slack's death makes her the youngest reported case to die from the Class A drug. On average, ten people a year die after taking ecstasy tablets.
- *Guardian* 16th July
 - The Medicines Control Agency is to consult on a proposal to prohibit the supply of medicinal products containing the herbal ingredient Kava-kava, following a provisional opinion from the Committee on Safety of Medicines about the risk of liver toxicity. Kava-kava is derived from the plant *Piper methysticum*, a member of the pepper family native to the South Pacific islands. It has been widely used in Europe for many years as a remedy for nervous states such as anxiety, tension and restlessness.
 - Press release (DoH)
 - The tenth annual report of the National Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit, jointly funded by the Department of Health and the Scottish Executive, has been published. The report looks back over the period from May 1990, when the unit was set up, to 31st December 2001 in relation to sporadic, familial and iatrogenic CJD and variant CJD. It provides various analyses of data, collected by the unit, on dietary, occupational and medical histories of UK patients. The report is available on .ac.uk www.cjd.ed.ac.uk.
 - Press release (DoH)
 - Home Secretary, David Blunkett, announced last month that cannabis has been downgraded from a class B drug to class C. This means that possession of cannabis will lead to a caution, rather than arrest. The British Lung Foundation is currently carrying out a review of research into the impact of smoking cannabis on health. Preliminary results suggest that the drug is at least as harmful as smoking tobacco and may carry a higher risk of some respiratory cancers.
 - BBC Online
 - Hospitals across Britain are turning off cancer-fighting radiotherapy machines worth millions of pounds because there are too few staff to run them. Dozens of hospitals have been forced to cut back on the number of patients they are treating each day because of an acute shortage of qualified radiographers. The failure by the majority of hospitals to make full use of their equipment has led to a dramatic increase in patient waiting times. Ann Cattell, chief executive of the Society and College of Radiographers said, 'What seems to be happening is that we are attracting fewer and fewer people into the profession. The pressures are considerable, the hours long and the pay is far better elsewhere.'
 - *The Times* 20th July
 - The High Court has ruled that more than 100 women who claim to have been damaged by the third generation contraceptive pill are not entitled to damages. Three pharmaceutical companies – Organon Laboratories, Schering Healthcare and Wyeth fought the case during a three-month hearing, which ended in June. The case is the first of its kind under the Consumer Protection Act. Had the women been successful, it could have led to massive compensation payouts.
 - BBC Online
 - Chemicals mimicking females hormones contained in substances such as beer, paint and tofu can affect human fertility, according to researchers from King's College London. Scientists found that even though the environmental chemical oestrogens are a thousand times less biologically potent than the oestrogen found naturally in a woman's body, they have an unexpectedly powerful effect on sperm, potentially causing them to 'burn out' long before they reach the egg. Professor Lynn Fraser told the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology meeting in Vienna held in July, 'Our study is the first to provide indirect and direct evidence that natural and environmental oestrogens significantly affect sperm fertilising ability.' Professor Fraser wants the research, originally carried out on mice, extended to humans.
 - *Guardian* 3rd July
 - A top level expert group is to be set up to investigate the potential causes of how anaesthetic tubing can become blocked by small objects. It is part of a wide range of action initiated after a police investigation into a series of anaesthetic incidents where no evidence of criminal conduct was found. Essex police led an investigation, codename 'Operation Orcadian' into thirteen incidents involving blocked anaesthetic tubing, to decide if they were linked.
 - Press release (DoH)
 - Giving birth by caesarean section could make it harder for women to get pregnant again, according to research carried out at Bristol University. Scientists found that women who tried to conceive again after a caesarean had a twelve per cent risk of taking more than a year to get pregnant. Woman who had given birth naturally had a seven per cent risk. The findings will fuel the debate over the sharp rise in caesarean births in Britain in recent decades. They have trebled in twenty-five years

- every fifth birth in England and Wales is now a caesarean.
 - *Guardian* 2nd July
- The Medicines Control Agency (MCA) has been criticised for allowing polio vaccines made from banned cattle products to be given to hundreds of thousands of people. A report by Professor Sir Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer investigated a brand of oral polio vaccine recalled in October 2000 after fears that it could be contaminated with BSE. Professor Donaldson said the health risk from the vaccine was ‘incalculably small’. However, he said, ‘Of more significance and concern is the fact that this problem was not identified by the MCA.’
 - *Daily Telegraph* 6th July
- The government has launched a major review of the future law on the retention and use of human organs and tissue, ‘Human Bodies, Human Choices’, for consultation in England and Wales. The consultation report is part of the government’s commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Sir Liam Donaldson, following the Bristol and Alder Hey cases, where organs and tissues were found to have been removed, stored or used without consent. The consultation also seeks views on removal of organs or tissues from living people. The report can be seen on www.doh.gov.uk. National Transplant Week took place in the UK in July. Billboards around the country, featuring the RAF’s elite fighter team The Red Arrows, encouraged the public to register to become organ donors.
 - Press releases (DoH)
- The government has announced the publication of its ‘Response to the House of Lords Select Committee’s Report on Stem Cell Research’. Health minister Lord Philip Hunt said, ‘The report provides a detailed overview and assessment of the issues that have emerged from the recent developments in embryo and stem cell research. The government wishes to see the outcomes of this research developed under appropriate control so that we can realise the promise of new treatments for life-threatening diseases and injuries, many of which are currently without cures.’ To see the full response see www.doh.gov.uk/stemcellresearch.
 - Press release (DoH)