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February 2003

Health in the news

We write as much of the country is covered in snow and bitterly cold. If this continues no doubt there will soon be the usual messages to the aged about staying in and keeping warm. As reported last month there still doesn't seem to be the usual clogging up of hospitals in the UK with flu and other winter-related illnesses.

The seemingly endless debate over the new Foundation hospitals drags on (see 'Foundation hospitals still having a rough ride'). Perhaps Tony Blair will have the final word in his speech on public services expected soon.

A proposed scrapping of the limit on the number of high-street pharmacists is worrying independent chemists, who foresee shoppers getting their prescriptions along with the rest of their supermarket shopping (see 'High-street chemists to get the boot?').

On the research front the most encouraging news is that scientists researching diabetes feel encouraged enough to herald a cure in the next ten years (see 'Another step towards a diabetes cure').

Along with promoting Foundation hospitals, Health Secretary Alan Milburn has had a very busy time lately. Money allocated to cancer funds has gone astray (see 'Audit ordered to find £320 million cancer funds') and he has unveiled new packages for consultants and GPs (see 'Re-think for consultants...and GPs').

We have two stories about drug reaction (see 'Drugs: adverse reactions not being reported' and 'Calls for inquiry into acne drug').

With the emphasis on preventative medicine, food has been under the spotlight this month. In particular, the encouragement to eat more fruit and vegetables and to watch salt levels (see 'Re-think for "five-a-day plan" and 'More food for thought'). And if you don't eat properly visits to the dentist could cost you dear (see 'Dentists: big swing to private care')!

Foundation hospitals still having a rough ride

Despite concessions by Health Secretary, Alan Milburn, the introduction of foundation hospitals is still being given a rough ride in parliament. In a lively Commons debate last month former Health Secretary, Frank Dobson, claimed that 'Maoists' at the centre of government were obsessed with change and trying to impose a permanent revolution on the NHS. 'It is a system under which some hospitals will deliberately be given advantages over neighbouring hospitals, inevitably leading to a two-tier service,' said Mr Dobson.

A total of 110 MPs, almost all Labour, have condemned the plans, signalling that the government will face a sizeable backbench rebellion when the bill is introduced in a month or two. In an attempt to get their support Mr Milburn has agreed that borrowing by foundation hospitals will count against government borrowing and no borrowing can be undertaken against their assets. A Downing Street official admitted it was 'touch and go' whether the public would believe that big health and education investments had improved services by the time of the next election. Prime Minister Tony Blair is due to make a speech on public services soon in a bid to answer claims that his reform programme, including greater diversity of provision, will prove divisive and create elitism.

• *The Times* 9th January

High-street chemists to get the boot?

Hundreds of small high-street pharmacists fear that the proposed deregulation of their services will put them out of business. The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has recommended that limits on the number of pharmacies allowed to handle NHS prescriptions should be scrapped, saying it would improve services for customers. The Department of Trade and Industry has three months to decide whether or not to accept the recommendations; the Department of Health will also have a say. If they approve, it could lead to more than 500 in-store pharmacies being



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opened in supermarkets. The OFT director-general John Vickers, however, said he believed that the consumer would benefit, with prices of over-the-counter medication falling as competition increased. He expected savings of £30 million a year, with the NHS itself saving £10 million through not having to regulate the number of businesses in the market. The changes should also increase pharmacy opening hours.

The plans will be fiercely opposed by Britain's 7,000 independent chemist's shops, many of which have relied on restrictions to survive. A survey of 200 GPs, published recently by the high-street chemist Boots, said that one-fifth of all GP appointments are unnecessary and could have been dealt with by a pharmacist. Alastair Buxton, head of NHS services for the pharmaceutical services negotiating committee, said that community pharmacists are a central plank of NHS plan policy to take the burden off GPs. 'We have a lot of plans for innovation and modernisation that will ease the pressure on the NHS, but if our future is uncertain they might not be allowed to happen.'

• *Health Service Journal* 16th January, *The Times* 18th January

Another step towards a diabetes cure

Scientists at Bath University are so encouraged by their research that they believe there may be a cure for diabetes within the next ten years. Tests show that it might be possible to insert a gene in patients which tricks patients' liver cells into behaving like those from a healthy pancreas, the organ which produces insulin. Two series of tests, using human cells grown in bottles and tadpoles from the African clawed frog, which has similar organs to humans, offer hope that patients could have a one-off injection and no further treatment. The Bath research, funded by the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council, used 'transdifferentiation', where one cell is converted to another. They introduced a gene to the liver cancer cells which gave them a pancreatic character. Some even produced insulin. Lead researcher, Professor Jonathan Slack, said, 'The results from these experiments have been very encouraging. This is the first step in the development of what could ultimately provide a cure for people suffering from diabetes, but there is a lot more work to do.' Eleanor Kennedy, research manager for the charity Diabetes UK, agreed the research was potentially exciting.

About 1.4 million people in the UK have been diagnosed with diabetes, about 300,000 with type one, the form which requires daily insulin injections. Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, whose diabetes became public last year, launched a government campaign to tackle the disease.

At St Thomas's hospital in central London he announced plans to ensure that eye screening services for diabetics will be in place by 2007.

• *Daily Telegraph* 8th January, *The Times* 21st January, BBC Online, *Guardian* 10th January

Missing £320 million cancer funds

The Health Secretary, Alan Milburn, has ordered an emergency audit of NHS cancer services after his officials warned that more than £320 million allocated to cancer care may have been siphoned off for undisclosed purposes. Mr Milburn suspects that financial controllers at every level of the NHS may have diverted cancer funds to make up for deficits in other parts of their budgets.

The government allocated £255 million for improvements in cancer care in 2001–2002 and £76 million in 2002–2003, but the strategic health authorities have not been able to account for the money. The Department of Health has told them their financial returns contained 'too many omissions and inaccuracies to be useful'. Richard Sullivan, head of clinical programmes at Cancer Research UK, said cancer charities had been putting pressure on the government to look into misallocation of cancer funds. It appeared that money was spent as intended on equipment, but hospitals were not funded to take on the extra radiologists, oncologists, surgeons, and nurses who were needed to use it. 'To avoid this happening again, the government will have to ringfence the money for cancer services,' said Dr Sullivan.

• *Guardian* 16th January

Re-think for consultants...

Despite hospital consultants rejecting a new contract of work last year, Health Secretary Alan Milburn recently unveiled a package of measures aimed at rewarding those senior hospital doctors who 'do most for NHS patients'. Local NHS trusts will be able to choose how best to use £250 million originally earmarked to pay for the new contract. There will also be a new code of conduct for NHS doctors who work in the private sector. Consultants may also be offered career breaks on full pay in an attempt to stop them leaving the NHS. The BMA indicated that it would oppose some of the proposals and would be holding talks with ministers. The NHS managers, however, welcomed the package, saying it should help trusts improve

services locally for the benefit of patients, and also improve the rewards to consultants for the work they do.

Training for some hospital consultants is likely to be cut by a year in an attempt to speed the recruitment and appointment of senior staff. Medical royal colleges have agreed to a review of the post-graduate qualifications needed before doctors can apply for consultant posts, a move designed to shorten the thirteen-year long career path to twelve in some specialities. The government is committed to employing 15,000 more consultants and GPs by 2008. The King's Fund thinktank has estimated that there will be a shortfall of 3,000. Nearly a quarter of Britain's consultants are trained outside the UK. This has led to questions being raised about the ethics of recruiting from developing countries and countries which may also be experiencing their own shortages.

...and GPs

GPs will receive a 'significant' pay rise if they accept the new GP contract, and even those practices opting out of providing out-of-hours cover will not be worse off, according to the British Medical Association. Balloting of GPs will finish on 11th April, but a large pay rise will be backdated to the beginning of the month if the deal is accepted. There are three areas still to be agreed – pensions, forced allocations of patients to practices, and pricing the contract. Negotiations of pensions are likely to be the most difficult to resolve.

The BMA has said that the new contract would attract new GPs into the profession. A survey published by the association at the end of last month shows that the shortage of doctors has worsened since the government's own survey was published three months ago. Over three per cent of family doctor posts in England have been vacant for three months or more, with more than one in ten of primary care trusts having vacancy rates greater than twice the national average.

• *Guardian* 21st January, BBC Online, *Health Service Journal* 16th January

the report, and warnings are not getting through to the public. Twelve drugs have been withdrawn from the market in the past five years because of safety fears that have arisen after they were licensed, but 200 new drugs have been launched in the same period.

In its report the NAO commends the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) for its world-class system for protecting public health, but says more must be done to raise its public profile and ensure its messages are heard. It says most leaflets enclosed with medicines are unhelpful and confusing for patients and better labelling would reduce 'medication error' in hospitals. One such example was the deaths of thirteen patients over fifteen years who were wrongly given a cancer drug, vincristine, into the spine when it should have been given into a vein. The Department of Health has since asked manufacturers to design devices that would prevent the administration of the wrong drug into the spine.

At the moment the MCA funds itself through fees to the pharmaceutical industry, in contrast to similar organisations in other countries, which are largely funded through government money. The report suggests that the Department of Health 'may need to consider the financial sustainability of the current funding arrangements'. The full report, *Safety, Quality, Efficacy: Regulating Medicines in the UK* can be seen at www.nao.gov.uk.

• *BMJ* 18th January, *Independent* 16th January

Calls for inquiry into acne drug

Dr James Chu, a consultant at the Hammersmith Hospital in London is asking for a commission into the acne drug Roaccutane, as he believes there is a causal relationship between it and depression. Families of patients allege dermatologists are persistently prescribing the drug for mild rather than severe acne, contrary to the prescribing rules, and are failing to conduct pregnancy tests, blood tests or psychiatric assessments. Campaigners want the drug, which is manufactured by Roche, withdrawn until manufacturers agree to help fund independent studies examining the risk of depression.

The UK government's Medicines Control Agency has been under pressure to review reported adverse reactions to the drug, which is known to be dangerous to women of childbearing age because of the possibility of birth defects. British safety information on possible psychiatric reactions was strengthened nearly five years ago. Now the MCA is leading the review by the European committee for proprietary medicinal products 'to ensure healthcare professionals and patients receive adequate and consistent information to

Drugs: adverse reactions not being reported

At least three out of four suspected adverse reactions to drugs are going unreported by doctors because they are too busy, unclear how the system works, or unsure what constitutes a serious reaction, according to a report from the National Audit Office (NAO). The system for controlling medicines in the UK is, in general, safe but health professionals are not sending in enough information, says

aid the safe use of isotretinoin (Roaccutane).’ David Chow, chairman of the Roaccutane Action Group UK, said there was sufficient evidence to warrant a public inquiry, as the drug had been associated with the suicides of 240 people worldwide.

• *Guardian* 8th January

All children may be given hep B vaccine

Every child in Britain could be vaccinated against hepatitis B after a twenty-fold increase in the number of people infected with the liver disease in recent years. Leading liver specialists have told the government that a nationwide vaccination scheme is needed and the Health Department has set up a committee to consider a scheme to inoculate all teenagers.

Most European countries have a national vaccination programme, but with about 300 cases a year Britain regarded that as unnecessary and too expensive. However, the position is being reviewed after a Public Health Laboratory Service study suggested that 6,300 infected people had entered Britain in each of the past four years, raising fears that the disease could spread more widely. At present only babies of infected mothers and some drug users are vaccinated in Britain, but a sub-committee of the government’s Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation is considering extending that either to all children, or to children in cities with large immigrant populations. With the government allowing 150,000 immigrants to settle in Britain every year it is reviewing the policy on pre-immigration health tests.

• *The Times* 16th January

Re-think for ‘five-a-day’ plan

The five-a-day message to encourage people to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables daily is being repackaged to avoid processed foods high in fat, sugar and salt. Firms such as Heinz, which promotes about seventy products under a ‘five-a-day the Heinz way’ banner, will have to review their recipes to decide whether they would meet the nutrition tests demanded by the Department of Health, or risk laying themselves open to criticism that they are confusing consumers. Heinz says half a can of its baked beans counts as a vegetable portion. A spokesman said it would wait and see what the new

criteria for processed and composite foods were before determining its new policy.

The relaunch has been partly prompted by concern among health professionals and the public that the five-a-day message has been open to interpretation by manufacturers. There has also been confusion about what constitutes a portion. This has now been set as the equivalent to a medium-sized apple or banana, a bowl of mixed salad, three tablespoons of peas and carrots, or 150 ml of pure fruit or vegetable juice. Drinks will only be allowed to constitute one of the five target portions, however much is drunk.

Only thirteen per cent of men and fifteen per cent of women eat the recommended five portions a day. The government says that eating the right amount of these foods could help prevent up to twenty per cent of deaths from heart disease and some cancers. Free fruit schemes for four to six-year-olds in schools and local initiatives to boost consumption in socially deprived areas have been established. The Department of Health is to introduce its own ‘five-a-day’ logo in the spring, which will be trademarked and granted to producers and retailers under licence.

• *Guardian* 11th January

More food for thought

An independent lobby group has challenged the claims of manufacturers to have reduced the levels of salt in their products. According to the Food Commission, the salt content of crisps has nearly doubled over the past twenty-five years, levels in baked beans have also risen, while levels in tomato soup and white bread have fallen only slightly. Some products aimed at children contain more salt in one serving than the recommended intake for a whole day. The commission also criticised the Football Association and some premier clubs for promoting junk foods and sugary drinks to children.

Plans for food and drink trials involving three-year-old children are being drawn up by government advisers in an attempt to settle the long-running dispute over whether additives affect infants’ behaviour. In 1999 a government-funded study of a group of children of the same age on the Isle of Wight was shelved, after medical and scientific advisers suggested there was not enough data to assess whether there was a causal link or an idiosyncratic effect on the 277 children tested. The Food Commission publicised the Isle of Wight study last October, claiming it did establish a causal link. The scientific advisers considering how new trials should be established want a wider range of additives to be tested than were involved in the previous study. A spokeswoman for the Food Commission said, ‘We know we need to do more work in this area. What is less clear is

how we do it and ensure research has scientific validity.'

• *Guardian* 20th January, BBC Online

Dentists: big swing to private care

For the first time since the establishment of the NHS in 1948 more than half of dentists' income now comes from treating private patients, according to a survey by a firm of healthcare analysts. The government has promised a fundamental reform of NHS dental services, after evidence that the profession has switched dramatically from public to private practice. The report said private earnings of dentists amounted to fifty-one per cent of income last year, against thirty-eight per cent in 1998 and seven per cent in 1992. Philip Blackburn, the report's author, said, 'Since our last survey in 1998, the proportion of patients paying privately 'on the spot' has remained relatively unchanged, though the number of patients enrolled in private dental benefit plans has grown strongly.'

John Renshaw, chairman of the British Dental Association, said the switch from the NHS would continue to accelerate until dentists received an NHS rate that would allow them to provide proper, unhurried treatment of their patients. 'Spending on dentistry has been fairly flat for the last five years, while spending on everything else in the NHS has rocketed,' he said. The government, however, insist they have invested nearly £150 million in the past two years to modernise NHS dentistry. A spokesman said, 'Over ninety per cent of people can get access to NHS dentistry when they need it by phoning NHS Direct. About 10,000 do so every month.' Clauses are to be included in a health bill in the current session of parliament to introduce 'far-reaching reform' of NHS dental services.

– Many dentists are refusing to treat people with HIV even though there is no risk of transmitting the disease if safety procedures are correctly followed. A spokesman for the British Dental Association said, 'The BDA supports the right of HIV-positive patients to seek dental treatment with a family dentist.'

• *Health Service Journal* 9th January, *Guardian* 6th January, BBC Online

Race to reach waiting-time target

In April the Department of Health hopes to announce that the NHS has hit its twelve-month inpatient waiting targets. It hasn't been easy though with NHS staff working at weekends and evenings, and private sector staff being

brought in to help. Latest figures for the quarter ending in November show numbers were down by 3,000 over the three-month period to 12,500. Many trusts report the huge effort and degree of commitment shown by their staff. The Medical Director of St Helens and Knowsley Hospitals trust spoke for many when he said, 'It is not so much around nursing staff – we have brought in staff from the Philippines, for instance. We really need theatre surgeons.'

Many NHS managers are aware that their success may be short-lived and the maximum wait may well be brought down to only six months in two years' time and three months by 2008. The King's Fund chief economist John Appleby is pessimistic about the NHS's long-term waiting goals. 'I think things are fairly bleak. The Department of Health is aware of the problems, that the drive to push down the waiting lists requires more and more work and that is just not sustainable.'

• *Health Service Journal* 23rd January

In brief

– Crucial medical research, which could save the lives of thousands of cancer sufferers, is being threatened by new rules to make patients' records more confidential. Scientists are warning they may have to abandon investigations into key areas of research because of the legal and bureaucratic hurdles they face. The country's largest medical charity, Cancer Research UK, has asked ministers to give them a full exemption from regulations in the Data Protection Act, which mean they must gain consent from individuals for every separate piece of research.

• *Observer* 5th January

– Complaints to the General Medical Council against doctors have increased almost fifteen-fold since 1990. Figures from the Medical Defence Union show complaints are rising by thirty-three per cent annually. Officials at the MDU said the rise reflected the fact that patients were now more willing to report doctors to the GMC, there was no evidence to suggest the increase was due to a decline in standards in the medical profession.

• BBC Online

– Researchers from Leeds found the use of ionisers in St James's University hospital had a significant impact in cutting the number of infections caused by a potentially dangerous bacterium called acinetobacter. The bug has been responsible for increasing numbers of sometimes fatal infections amongst hospital patients. Lead researcher Dr Clive Beggs said, 'We believe that the negative air ions are removing the bacteria from the air,

so stopping the transmission of infection.' Consultants at St James's intensive care unit are so impressed by trials of the ionisers that they have asked the University to leave them at the unit.

- BBC Online

- There is cautious optimism that the predicted epidemic of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) may never materialise. The Department of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at Imperial College in London has been monitoring the disease since its inception. 'Statistically speaking, the figures are in decline, and the upper boundaries on our estimates are coming down,' said Dr Azra Ghani. The Public Health Laboratory Service, which analyses the figures every quarter shares the optimism. Its website notes, 'There is now statistical evidence that the epidemic is no longer increasing at the rate seen previously, and that it may have reached or be reaching a peak.'

- *The Times* 24th January

- A pill which can prevent people catching flu is being launched in the UK. The drug, Tamiflu, is the only treatment which can be taken orally, in a capsule or syrup. It is the same type of drug as Relenza, but that has to be inhaled. It is also the first drug licensed to treat influenza in children. John Oxford, professor of virology at Barts Hospital in London carried out a study which found Tamiflu was effective in preventing people around a flu sufferer developing the disease themselves; it was effective in eighty per cent of cases.

- BBC Online

- Nearly 2,000 patients in a predominantly Asian immigrant community in Derby were forced to find another doctor when their local surgery closed. Now they are outraged to learn that the centre is to reopen as a new service for asylum-seekers only. About £500,000 is being spent on refurbishing the premises which will open later this month. Derby has been designated as a centre to receive a regular flow of asylum-seekers into temporary accommodation while their applications for refugee status are considered. Tony Walsh, director of Derby Racial Equality Council said, 'The Primary Care Trust has a legal and moral responsibility to provide healthcare services for asylum-seekers.'

- *The Times* 18th January

- Hospitals across the UK are said to be denying haemophiliac patients access to their medical records. Two hundred haemophiliacs are suing the US drug companies who supplied the NHS with contaminated

blood products in the 1970s and 1980s. However, they have been told their records are missing, unavailable, or cannot be given to them. More than 500 haemophiliacs were given the virus hepatitis C accidentally by the National Health Service in Scotland before 1988. So far the Scottish Executive has refused to offer compensation, on the grounds that an effective method of screening blood was not available before 1991. Taking up the case of the 'missing' records the Haemophilia Scottish Group's Forum said the health minister should issue a directive to health authorities to solve the problem. The Scottish Parliament's health committee has pledged to investigate.

- BBC Scotland online

- Maternity units across the UK are being closed or reorganised, according to the National Childbirth Trust. The charity claims that small and medium-sized units are being closed without measuring the impact of the changes on maternity care. This reduces the chances of women getting access to care close to home and, therefore, their chance of having a normal birth. A survey from the NCT said obstetric and paediatric services were becoming more centralised, while innovative midwifery schemes were closing or being left as pilot projects.

- *The Times* 18th January

- One in five women between the ages of sixty and seventy-nine in the UK has heart disease, according to a study at Bristol University. Researchers also identified huge variations across the country, with women in Scotland most at risk of developing the condition. In addition, they found that many women over the age of sixty are not receiving the treatment they need. The researchers urged doctors to do more to help these women and to encourage them to adopt healthier lifestyles.

- BBC Online

- Babies born after IVF treatment appear four times more prone to a rare childhood illness. Researchers in Birmingham, Cambridge and Cardiff say assisted reproduction might predispose children to birth defects and some cancers. They think a genetic 'imprinting disorder' might be responsible for an increased risk of Beckwith-Weidemann syndrome (BWS). Children with this disease have an abnormally large body and tongue, and one side of the body grows quicker than the other. They might have defects in their abdominal wall, hearing and speech problems, and difficulty swallowing. One in ten develops childhood cancer. BWS normally affects between two and five children in 100,000. A study looked at 149 children with BWS and found six (four per cent) were born either after IVF or a related technique called

intracytoplasmic sperm injection. This increase could have repercussions for the way IVF and related techniques are performed, and reinforce ethical, safety, and legal arguments against cloning. The human fertilisation and embryo authority is studying the findings.

- *Guardian* 16th January
- Stark health warnings have begun to appear on cigarette packets in Britain. It follows an European Union directive which said they should cover thirty per cent of the front of cigarette packets and forty per cent of the back. General warnings such as ‘Smoking kills’ will appear on the front of packets and one of fourteen, more specific, warnings will appear on the back. These will be rotated so that they will all appear at regular intervals. The warnings, such as ‘Smokers die younger’ will also be highlighted by thick black borders.
- BBC Online
- Public health experts say that there may be an epidemic of mumps if parents refuse to allow their children to have the MMR vaccine after cases in Wales more than doubled in a year. Some experts fear that the increase among children in Wales (143 last year, up from 65 in 2001) is an indication that mumps will remain endemic among the population, putting unvaccinated children at risk. Parents have been shunning the triple vaccine since it was linked to autism and bowel disease. Although several studies have dismissed fears of a link. Health officials have alerted GPs to be vigilant, as few parents will recognise the once-prevalent disease. It is rarely fatal but has been known to cause meningitis.
- *The Times* 6th January
- An embryologist who tricked women into thinking they were having fertilised eggs inserted into their wombs has been jailed for eighteen months. Paul Fielding, forty-four, allowed eight women to have the operations at an NHS clinic and a private clinic both in Basingstoke between 1997 and 1999, knowing they had no hope of becoming pregnant. His job was to retrieve frozen embryos, thaw them and prepare them for implantation, for which he was paid £50 a time. But instead he faked the work and then falsified the records as part of a deception to clear his debts. Fielding is now facing a civil action for damages by seventy-five men and women in what is believed to be the biggest compensation claim involving IVF.
- *Independent* 16th January
- Eye drops that prevent shortsightedness are currently

being developed by the drugs company Novartis. The drops prevent myopia developing by stopping abnormal growth of the eyeball, according to early trials on children. A spokesman from Novartis said, ‘These eye drops could be the difference between having to wear glasses all your life or not having to wear them at all.’ Myopia is an inherited condition that affects about forty-five per cent of the population.

- *Daily Express* 17th January
- A British pensioner who was faced with a nine-month wait for a new hip on the NHS travelled to Turkey for his operation last month. Brian Theaker of Dorset paid less than £4,500 for the trip, the ten-day stay in a hotel in Istanbul, and the operation itself. He saved up for the operation, which was performed by a professor of orthopaedics. Last year the NHS sent 234 patients abroad for operations; there is also a booming market in private operations in Britain.
- *The Times* 17th January