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June 2002

Health in the news

Health Secretary Alan Milburn certainly saw his fair share of conferences in May. At one in London he outlined plans for new 'foundation' hospitals (see 'Hospitals: the good, the best and the bad') and in Harrogate he told delegates how the NHS would in future rely permanently on private healthcare companies to treat patients from hospital waiting lists (see 'Private sector given permanent NHS role'). However, it seems that the waiting lists wouldn't be quite so bad if operations weren't cancelled by managers and doctors, according to a report from the Audit Commission (see 'Inefficient operating theatres').

It seems that despite Gordon Brown's promises in the recent budget voters still aren't convinced that the Labour party will deliver (see 'Major survey shows NHS not safe in Labour's hands').

Donor offspring wanting to know the identity of their genetic fathers has led to a re-think of the UK fertility laws, and high profile paternity cases are bringing into question the ethics of secretly taken DNA samples (see 'UK fertility laws and secret DNA testing questioned').

Drug use in the UK has risen to the highest level in Europe. Plans are being drawn up to halt the route of crack cocaine into Britain and also show shock anti-drugs videos to children (see 'Government accused of losing the drugs war').

GPs will soon need a licence to practise under new plans drawn up by the General Medical Council (see 'GPs: can I see your licence please?').

The government is funding more schemes to get children off to a good start (see 'Encouraging healthy children'). But when they get older they must be aware of the possible effects of aspirin and a controversial acne drug (see 'News from the Medicines Control Agency').

And some not so heartening news for women – you are more likely to get intensive care treatment following a heart attack if you are a man! (see 'Heart attacks: better to be a man').

Private sector given permanent NHS role

The NHS will rely permanently on private healthcare companies to treat patients from hospital waiting lists, Health Secretary Alan Milburn told health service managers at the NHS Confederation conference in Harrogate recently. It would not be enough, he said, to sign short-term contracts with European and US firms to bring down waiting times. They would not be willing to invest in building facilities unless they were offered the prospect of long-term profit. Ministers had previously voiced willingness to use private firms to treat NHS patients as a short-term expedient, but this new line is not thought to be popular with Labour traditionalists. Karen Jennings of the public service union Unison, said, 'We don't want to see large private companies as a permanent feature of the NHS. Bringing in teams from abroad makes more sense than shipping patients all over Europe, but in our view it should be a stopgap measure.' Mr Milburn is meeting company chiefs from Europe and the US over the next few months with a view to encouraging them to invest in parts of Britain where the waiting lists were longest. He said, 'I expect to see a growing number of these new providers in place, beginning later this year.' These measures were a 'fundamental change' he said, but he could not predict the eventual size of NHS contracts with the private sector. Gill Morgan, chief executive of the NHS Confederation said permanent contracts for private healthcare providers would not be a problem. 'As long as the NHS maintains its values, it does not matter if it buys services from any provider that can deliver,' she said.

In a wide-ranging speech Mr Milburn told NHS managers that NHS patients waiting too long for treatment would be entitled to go to another NHS or private hospital. The government was already promising this for heart patients waiting more than six months, but this would be extended soon to orthopaedics, ophthalmology and ear, nose and throat surgery. The Minister also promised to reduce by two-thirds the amount of information that local health services have to submit to the Department of Health. A panel of managers and doctors would be set up 'to act as a firebreak' between the centre and local health services, vetting communications to weed out the unnecessary.

• *Guardian* 25th May



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GPs: can I see your licence please?

Every practising doctor in the UK will need a licence under government plans to create a safer NHS for patients. They will have to submit evidence, collected over a five-year period, to the regulatory body the General Medical Council (GMC); this must show that their practice is up to date and of a high standard. Provided they meet set standards, they will retain their licence to practise. Doctors who do not wish to take part or do not reach the required standards will not get a licence, so they won't be allowed to treat patients or prescribe for them. It will be a criminal offence to pretend to have a licence.

The licence to practise is a key component of reforms to the GMC, which will help the council provide better protection for patients from under-performing doctors and make it a more open and accountable organisation. The proposals have been developed by the GMC in consultation with patients and the medical profession. They form part of the government's modernised approach to regulation as set out in the NHS Plan of July 2000.

• Press release (DoH)

Hospitals: the good, the best and the bad

At a conference of top NHS managers from the UK and other European countries, Health Secretary Alan Milburn outlined plans for thirty-five best-performing hospitals in the country to be freed from strict Whitehall management and financial control. He said they would become independent, not-for-profit enterprises with an 'annual cash-for-performance contract' and power to spend NHS funds as they see fit. The hospitals would be neither conventional public-sector nor private-sector bodies, but a type of hybrid organisation for which there is no UK model. Mr Milburn is expected to cite hospitals in Spain, Sweden and Denmark as enterprises from which the UK could learn.

The 'foundation' hospitals need to have received three-star ratings in the Department of Health's annual performance tables. At least four top-performing NHS trusts already look set to be given complete freedom to decide how they work. Hospitals in Cambridge, Northumbria, Peterborough and Norfolk are to apply to join the first wave. If successful, the hospitals will start operating as shadow NHS foundation trusts next April and, subject to legislation, will become fully operational before the end of 2003.

A single hospital trust wrecked targets on cutting NHS

waiting lists. The monthly figures of the Royal United Hospitals in Bath showed that up to 280 patients had been made to wait for more than fifteen months for an operation. In the whole of the rest of England, however, just one patient was in a similar queue. Health minister John Hutton said that firm action was being taken and several senior management figures had already resigned or been suspended. Mr Hutton said, 'The isolated problem of one hospital must not cloud what is a considerable achievement for NHS hospitals and staff throughout England. There is a long way to go, but the facts speak for themselves.'

• *The Times* 11th May, *Independent* 22nd May, BBC Online, Press releases (DoH)

Government accused of losing the drugs war

The Home Affairs Select Committee has published a report demanding a rethink in government drugs policy. Politicians, senior police officers, customs chiefs, doctors and drug charities all face scathing criticism for failing to stop drug use in Britain rising to the highest levels in Europe. Ministers responded by announcing a new move to halt the main crack cocaine route into Britain. It is estimated that half the crack cocaine in Britain is smuggled in from Jamaica. Plans are being drawn up to train Jamaican police and provide equipment to catch drug smugglers flying to Britain from Kingston and Montego Bay. A separate plan to show shock anti-drugs videos to schoolchildren as young as ten has been unveiled by the education secretary Estelle Morris. She will also recommend that any child selling drugs in or near school should be permanently expelled.

In a more controversial move following the report the committee recommended that thousands of addicts be prescribed heroin at GPs surgeries. A nationwide network of 'safe injecting areas' is also to be set up where addicts can use diamorphine, or 'medical heroin'. There are now only thirty GPs licensed to prescribe diamorphine. David Blunkett, the Home Secretary, wants the numbers to increase to 1,500 as a first stage. He is also likely to lay an order before the House of Commons this month amending the Misuse of Drugs Act so that cannabis can be downgraded. Home Office officials said, however, that reclassifying the drug ecstasy was 'not on the agenda'.

– The judge in Britain's highest court has called for cannabis to be legalised, Lord Bingham, the senior law lord, said he would legalise the drug, adding, 'It is stupid having a law which isn't doing what it is there for.'

• *Independent* 22nd May, *Observer* 19th May, *Guardian* 21st May, Press release (DoH)

UK fertility laws and secret DNA testing questioned

Infertility specialists are concerned that the supply of sperm donors would dry up if the government changed the law to remove their anonymity. A woman and a child who were conceived using sperm from anonymous donors have begun a High Court action to try to discover more about their genetic fathers. They will ask the court to order the establishment of a voluntary register of sperm and egg donors that would help tens of thousands of donor offspring to trace their genetic parents. Their cases have the support of Lady Warnock who chaired the inquiry that led to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. The Warnock report in 1984 recommended that donors should be anonymous. However, Lady Warnock now argues that in Scandinavia and other countries, where donors are no longer anonymous, research shows that the change has not resulted in significant under-supply of donors.

Secretly taking DNA samples to settle paternity cases or obtain information about an individual should be made a criminal offence, says Britain's genetic watchdog, the Human Genetics Commission. The recommendation is one of a number of proposed rules on the use and storage of genetic data. It would prevent genetic information being obtained without an individual's consent, or testing DNA for diseases, genetic conditions or family connections. The only exception to the proposed rules would be when collecting or testing DNA was for legally authorised forensic or medical purposes. The subject has been brought under the spotlight when clandestinely obtained DNA was cited in what is expected to become the world's most expensive child support case involving a British actress and an American film producer.

• *Independent* 21st May, *Guardian* 14th May, *The Times* 18th May

Inefficient operating theatres

NHS hospitals in England and Wales waste at least 150,000 operating slots every year because managers and doctors cancel sessions in theatres for no good reason, according to findings by the Audit Commission. A scathing report said the average hospital cancelled about ten per cent of the available sessions, but in some poorly managed trusts the cancellation rate was more than thirty per cent. Theatres were often closed because surgeons or anaesthetists took leave at short notice without ensuring colleagues

would fill their slots. The commission acknowledged it was unrealistic to expect every operating theatre to work at full capacity throughout the year. However, with good management cancelled sessions could be 'reduced to five per cent or less of those scheduled'. The report was based on routine audits of seventy NHS trusts over the past three years.

Another report from the Health Services Management Centre (MSMC) at the University of Birmingham shows that in some specialities medical productivity has dropped by twenty per cent. Doctors said the drop was linked to a nationwide shortage of hospital beds, which prevents many surgeons from admitting patients for operations. According to HSMC data the number of patients treated by a single consultant who works exclusively in the NHS fell by an average of ten per cent in the past six years. Health economist Professor Alan Maynard of York suggested the money being allocated by the government was not being spent on patient care. Health Secretary Alan Milburn responded that better administrative and IT support creates a better balance between the quantity of patients that are being seen, and the quality of care being given.

• *Independent* 16th May, *Guardian* 16th May, BBC Online

Heart attacks: better to be a man

Men admitted to intensive care units with heart attacks were significantly younger, less ill and had a lower hospital death rate than women, according to researchers who studied the histories of 45,687 patients in 91 units over three years. The results suggested that hospitals' criteria for admission of patients to intensive care with blockage of the coronary artery were more stringent for women. It found no suggestion of gender differences in other conditions. The study, by researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre, London involved hospitals in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

– £14 million has been made available to equip every single front-line NHS ambulance in England with the latest technology, aimed at treating heart attack victims as quickly as possible.

• *Guardian* 15th May, Press release (DoH), BBC Online

Encouraging healthy children

Hundreds of children will enjoy free swimming as part of a series of government pilots aimed at increasing access

to physical activity and sport in low-income areas. At the NHS 'Taking Action' physical conference last month public health minister Yvette Cooper announced a new £2.5 million programme of community pilot schemes. These pilots will start later this year and run for two years. They are being developed with Sport England and the Country-side Agency.

Yvette Cooper has also announced that the government's National School Fruit Scheme is to be extended to London at the start of the autumn term. This second phase will bring the total number of children being given access to a piece of fruit every school day to over 600,000, around one quarter of infant school children in the country.

A new website, which focuses on protecting children from the risks of skin cancer from the sun, was launched to coincide with Euromelanoma Day. The Sun Safe Website www.doh.gov.uk/sunsafer includes activity/work sheets to help teachers and parents explain the risks to children, and an interactive tool which identifies your skin profile and explains how each skin type behaves in the sun.

- Press releases (DoH)

Government criticised on AIDS funding

Speaking at one of Europe's biggest AIDS charity galas in Austria, Sir Elton John said that the government should be 'thoroughly ashamed' of its record on spending to fight the threat of AIDS. The singer's own foundation has raised £24 million for prevention and treatment of the disease. The Department of Health responded that NHS funding in England for HIV and AIDS had increased from just under £252 million in 1997–1998 to £331 million this year. However, AIDS charities are worried that despite rates of HIV continuing to increase the government no longer dedicates separate funding for HIV/AIDS work. Funds are administered as part of mainstream budgets, leaving much of the decision making and commissioning to individual primary care trusts.

More than 600 former patients were offered HIV tests after two hospitals each revealed that a healthcare worker was infected with the virus. The Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust said a staff member was diagnosed HIV-positive and immediately stopped clinical work. The worker was granted a court order preventing identification. In another development, the Highland Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, in Inverness, revealed it had written to 116 patients explaining they had undergone a procedure performed by a male healthcare worker who was HIV-positive.

- *Independent* 16th May, *Guardian* 16th May

News from the Medicines Control Agency

The Medicines Control Agency (MCA) is introducing strict limits for the use of aspirin among children under sixteen to cut the risk of a rare disease that can lead to seizures, coma, liver failure and death. Household brands of the drug, such as Anadin, Aspro, Beechams and Disprin will have to change their labels and patient information over six months. A publicity campaign is being planned before the start of next winter's flu season to explain the measures to teenagers and parents.

An acne drug has been linked to teenagers' deaths in Britain. Campaigners have told the MCA that they believe the drug Roaccutane caused mental and physical harm to the children. They want the agency to withdraw its UK licence from the pharmaceutical company Roche, pending further research. MCA statistics show fifteen young people committed suicide in Britain while taking the drug. Roche reject the suggestion that the drug is in any way to blame for the suicides or depression and insist the drug is safe.

- *Guardian* 23rd May, BBC Online

More controversy over childhood vaccination

Vaccinating children against chickenpox could lead to millions of cases of shingles in older people say UK researchers. After a bout of chickenpox the virus remains lurking inside the sensory nerves. It stays there until a fall in immunity, usually after the age of sixty, allows it to flare up as shingles; twenty per cent of patients experience severe and lasting pain. Marc Brisson and his team of scientists from the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) in London say that adults living with children are less likely to develop shingles than those who are not. This is because being exposed to children, and therefore chickenpox, acts like a booster vaccine against shingles. But if all children are vaccinated for chickenpox, adults who have had the disease will not be exposed to enough of the virus to prevent full-blown shingles later in life.

Chickenpox is regarded as fairly harmless in Europe so vaccination against the disease is not widespread. But in the US, where vaccination was introduced in 1995, cases of the disease have fallen by up to eighty per cent. The UK Department of Health states there is no current plan to introduce universal immunisation against chickenpox but it is aware of the PHLS work and will look at it. Earlier this year the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline

submitted a vaccine combining chickenpox and the triple measles, mumps and rubella vaccine for approval.

• *New Scientist* 4th May, BBC Online

Research news

Trials of a promising new treatment for Alzheimer's disease will begin shortly – and it might work for type 2 diabetes as well. Scientists at the Royal Free and University College Medical School in London have developed a drug which has already produced promising results in nineteen people with a rare condition called systemic amyloidosis. The forthcoming trials are especially welcome after the disappointment surrounding the recent abandonment of the trial of an Alzheimer's vaccine developed by Elan Pharmaceuticals. That trial was halted after some patients showed signs of inflammation of the nervous system.

Scientists from Imperial College London have, for the first time, successfully changed mouse stem cells into a specific type of lung cell. This means it may one day be possible to regenerate damaged lung tissue. Although the research is not likely to result in a treatment for about a decade, scientists believe it will make it possible eventually to repair lungs that have been damaged by disease, by implanting fully functioning lung cells to repopulate damaged areas. Unlike transplantation from a donor, the cells can be developed in such a way that the body would not reject them.

A British scientist is still hopeful that cannabis extracts will relieve the symptoms of multiple sclerosis (MS). Dr William Nottcutt, a consultant in pain management at the James Paget Hospital in King's Lynn said, 'I have many patients on my trials coming back saying cannabis has improved their quality of life.' However, a small Dutch study of sixteen MS patients given cannabis extract in capsule form found no apparent benefits. Dr Nottcutt said this lack of effect might be due to the way the drug was given, or the relatively low doses. He said, 'We have been giving patients the drug through a nasal spray so we can get them up to the right dosage very quickly.'

• *Guardian* 24th May, BBC Online, *New Scientist* 15th May

European drugs industry must keep pace with US

Government ministers and top-level representatives of the UK pharmaceutical industry met in London last month to discuss how to respond to a recent EU report on improving the competitiveness of the European pharmaceutical industry. Co-chaired by UK Health Minister Lord Philip Hunt and Tom McKillop, CEO of AstraZeneca, this was

the second meeting of the Ministerial Industry Strategy Group (MISG).

The EU report, produced by a Group of Ten (known as G10), bringing together government, industry and other parties from around Europe, was a response to the perception that over the last decade the European pharmaceutical industry has fallen behind the US. The report, presented to Commission President Romano Prodi earlier in the month, set out fourteen recommendations for action. The UK, as a leading location for the pharmaceutical industry in Europe, will be working with its partners in Europe to ensure that the recommendations are followed through. Lord Hunt said, 'The UK has a thriving and successful pharmaceutical industry, and we want to keep it that way.'

• Press release (DoH)

Major survey shows NHS not safe in Labour's hands

Following the excitement of the budget and Chancellor Gordon Brown's promises to rebuild the NHS it seems that there is overwhelming public scepticism about the government's ability to keep its promises. A new opinion poll of 10,000 voters shows that just one in six voters think the promised 35,000 new nurses will be recruited; only one in ten believe pledges to fund 15,000 more doctors will be kept by the target date of 2008; and three quarters do not trust another promise that the maximum waiting time for operations will fall to six months before the next election. However, three out of four patients were either very satisfied or quite satisfied with their last visit to a GP or local hospital. Approval rating for both nurses and doctors rise above eighty per cent. Also, despite repeated claims that hospitals and surgeries are in disrepair, almost ninety per cent of patients were satisfied with the condition and cleanliness of those they visited.

While forty-one per cent rate their local NHS as good or very good, the figure fell to just fifteen per cent when patients were asked what they thought of the service nationally. This difference will almost certainly be blamed by politicians on the way it is covered by the media. Labour will be disappointed almost half the electorate do not think the NHS is 'safe in their hands'; the Tories can't gloat about that: sixty per cent do not trust them to run it either.

• *Observer* 19th May

Appointments

- Professor Raman Bedi has been appointed as the new Chief Dental Officer for England from October. He succeeds Dame Margaret Seward who retired at the end of September. Professor Bedi is currently Professor of Transcultural Oral Health and Honorary Consultant in Paediatric Dentistry at the Eastman Dental Institute and Hospital.
- Sheila Adam, Director of Specialist Health Services and Deputy Chief Medical Officer, has been appointed as the North East London Health Authority's Public Health Director. She will take up her new role in June.
- Harry Cayton, Chief Executive of the Alzheimer's Society, has been appointed to the new role of Director of Patient Experience and Public Involvement in the Department of Health.
- Press releases (DoH)

In brief

- Less than a fortnight after losing the final round of her battle for her husband's help in ending her life, Diane Pretty died. The 43-year-old, who suffered from motor neurone disease, had battled through the high court, the House of Lords, and finally the European court of human rights for the right to her husband's help in dying before the choking and asphyxia, which often mark the final stages of the illness.
In the light of the high-profile cases of Mrs Pretty and Miss B, whom courts granted the right to die in April, the GMC is to prepare guidelines outlining when it believes it is right to withhold life-prolonging treatment. The council believes the complex ethical issues should be clarified and its advice is expected to suggest that it is not always in the best interests of patients to prolong their lives.
- *Guardian* 13th May
- Following consultations earlier this year, the seventh wave of topics being looked at by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) will include new drugs for cancer, coronary heart disease, hepatitis, and pain relief for multiple sclerosis. Health Minister Lord Philip Hunt said, 'I am particularly pleased that, while it covers key government priorities such as cancer and neurological conditions, it also takes in a wider agenda – for example producing guidance on issues such as the management of wounds and of nutrition.'
- Press release (DoH)

- Hundreds more diabetes specialists are needed in the NHS to cope with increasing numbers of adults suffering from the disease. Adult-onset, or type 2 diabetes, is one of the most common illnesses among middle-aged and older people in the UK. If it is not properly managed, patients can suffer severe complications – such as blindness, amputations and kidney disease – and are at far higher risk of developing heart disease or suffering a stroke. The number of people with diabetes is expected to increase by half over the next decade but the current number of trainees would fill only half the recommended number of consultant posts. The president of the Royal College of Physicians, Sir George Alberti – himself a diabetes specialist – said, 'We are sitting on a time bomb and will not be able to deliver the necessary care demanded by both our patients and the government unless drastic action is taken.'

- BBC Online

- Fewer than half of all babies born in England have a completely natural delivery. The rate of Caesareans has risen to 21.5 per cent, almost double the level ten years ago. Induction (twenty-one per cent) and the use of instruments like forceps (eleven per cent) push up the intervention rate. The National Childbirth Trust has called for urgent action to reduce Caesareans to World Health Organization recommended levels of ten to fifteen per cent of births and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence is considering new guidelines on Caesareans. The Department of Health aims to recruit 2,000 midwives over the next four years. A spokesperson said, 'Technical advances over the last twenty years have enabled obstetricians to identify complications earlier, making interventions more appropriate. Procedures are now safer than ever, which is also a factor in their increased use.'

- *Health Service Journal* 16th May, BBC Online

- Fears of a cancer risk from staple foods such as potatoes, bread and rice have been reinforced by the findings of scientists at the Central Science Laboratory in York. Significant levels of acrylamide, a probably cancer-causing chemical, have been found in a range of chips, crisps and cereals on general sale. The Food Standards Agency said that the chemical appeared to be formed naturally when foods were baked, fried, roasted, grilled and barbecued and therefore may also be present in meat. The results follow recent medical warnings that the nation is eating too much 'junk' food, fried and processed meals, which may be linked to cancer, heart disease, strokes and infertility. Consumers are being urged not to panic and to follow their normal diet and cooking

methods. The findings have been discussed by the European Union's scientific committee on food and a formal meeting has been convened by the World Health Organization this month.

- *The Times* 18th May

- Sales of products to help smokers quit are nearing the £100 million mark, a report suggests. Levels of sales for Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) have risen dramatically and are expected to be 160% higher than in 1997. Nicotine patches and chewing gum are among the top sellers by people trying to give up smoking. Public health minister Yvette Cooper said that seventy per cent of smokers say they want to give up. The figures showed that the government's support was already starting to pay off. 'Through making NRT available on prescription, ongoing investment in cessation services and a commitment to ban tobacco advertising by the end of the year we are tackling the single most preventable cause of ill-health in this country,' she said.

The NHS Asian Tobacco Helpline was one of three sponsors of the Brick Lane Mela festival for the Bangladeshi community in London last month. The helpline is available in five mother tongue languages and provides confidential advice on tobacco and paan chewing. It also offers to put smokers and chewers who want to quit in touch with their local smoking cessation service.

- Press releases (DoH), BBC Online

- A study by the charity Epilepsy Bereaved was launched at the House of Lords to mark the beginning of National Epilepsy Week. It called for major investment in NHS epilepsy services and spelt out ways the health service could save more lives. More than 300,000 people living in the UK are affected by epilepsy and official figures suggest that about 1,000 people die every year as a result of the condition. Professor David Fish, consultant neurologist at the National Hospital in London said, 'This report is exceedingly important and was undertaken to see whether there were areas where action could be taken to reduce this tragic loss of life from epilepsy.'

- BBC Online

- The government has launched a consultation of a National Strategy for Suicide Prevention in England that will take forward its commitment to reducing suicide deaths by at least a fifth by 2010. The target was set out in the White Paper 'Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation'. Action has already been taken to reduce suicides. The National Service Framework for Mental Health, published in September 1999, set out steps for prisons to reduce suicides, including the removal of ligature points from cells and care suits. There was also a ten per cent fall in

the number of deaths related to paracetamol between 1998 and 1999, following the reduction in the number of packets sold in one pack in September 1998. Copies of the consultation document can be found on the Department of Health website at www.doh.gov.uk/mentalhealth/index.htm.

- Press release (DoH)

- The number of British schoolchildren contracting malaria appears to be spiralling, due to increased travel to tropical countries. At St George's Hospital in London rates of childhood malaria have nearly tripled in the past twenty-five years. Experts there say many cases could have been prevented with the correct medication. They are calling for better education of families, healthcare professionals, travel agents and airlines about the importance of taking anti-malarial drugs, using mosquito repellent and avoiding exposure to mosquitoes, which tend to bite between dusk and dawn.

- BBC Online

- A consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology who was sacked after raising concerns about the high infant death rate and appalling treatment of female patients at a Tyneside hospital has won her case for unfair dismissal and racial discrimination. Instead of investigating Dr Feyi Awotona's allegations, hospital managers set up a 'kangaroo court' with the express purpose of sacking her from her post as head of the hospital's labour ward, a tribunal in Newcastle heard. Dr Awotona was offered £85,000 to drop her case but refused. Her four-year fight ended with an employment tribunal judgement against South Tyneside hospital. Following the hearing Dr Awotona called on Health Secretary, Alan Milburn, to take action to protect other whistleblowing medical staff from being victimised.

- *Guardian* 14th May

- NHS managers have been accused of displaying a cynical attitude towards cleanliness in their hospitals as a survey revealed that one in ten patients believed they had caught an infection while being treated. Professor Hugh Pennington, a medical microbiologist who led the inquiry into the notorious Lanarkshire *E coli* food poisoning outbreak of 1996 said, 'It is a scandal we are not doing what we could do. We should not bring patients in and then allow them to leave in a worse state than when they came in.' Other experts claim that the spread of superbugs such as MRSA, that are impervious to common antibiotics, has been fuelled by NHS targets. Overcrowding hospitals are under pressure to admit patients fast, operate on them quickly, and discharge them as soon as possible.

- *The Times* 11th May, *Guardian* 16th May
- Some traditional English sausages could be banned under plans being considered to reduce any risk of the sheep form of BSE being passed to humans. Scientists advising the Food Standards Agency have suggested that sheep intestines – used in fifteen per cent of sausages – should be removed from the food chain. They have also called on baby food manufacturers to label the country of origin of products containing lamb so parents can avoid them if they wish. The scientists believe these measures will help to reduce still further the theoretical risk of humans contracting the disease by eating lamb, mutton or goat's meat. There is no evidence to suggest any risk and scientists said their proposals were merely precautionary.
- BBC Online

- Children are at greater risk of developing eczema because of an increasing use of soaps, bath and shower gels and baby wipes. A study revealed that one in five children now develops the condition and blamed warmer and less well-ventilated homes. Less than five per cent of British children developed the skin condition in the 1950s, but now up to twenty per cent are affected at some stage. Dr Michael Cork, a consultant dermatologist at Sheffield University, urged parents to cut down on soapy detergents and baby wipes and to switch to moisturising emollients.
- BBC Online

- Public health minister Yvette Cooper and schools' minister Catherine Ashton have welcomed the publication of OFSTED's report on Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in schools. The report will be sent to all primary, secondary and special schools and Local Education Authorities. It sets out the importance of SRE in ensuring pupils have the knowledge, skills and confidence to make informed decisions about their lives.
 - Giving school pupils a single lesson in emergency contraception could reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy, according to a report. A study published in the *British Medical Journal* says the lesson would improve pupils' knowledge but did not make them more likely to have sex.
- Press release (DoH), BBC Online

- Health minister Jacqui Smith has announced details of the new curriculum for the social work degree course. It is hoped the degree will produce social workers who are able to work in new and changing settings such as Care Trusts and in the private and voluntary sectors, as well as in more traditional settings. Earlier in the month the health minister launched the second phase of the government's social worker awareness and recruitment campaign. The first phase, launched in October 2001, produced encouraging and positive results with calls to the helpline exceeding targets by sixty per cent. Around 14,000 people called for more information about a career in social work.
- Press release (DoH)