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March 2002

Health in the news

As concern about the safety of the MMR vaccine was first raised in 1998 it seems surprising that it should dominate the health news in Britain in 2002. February, however, saw much media discussion of the consequences of the jab, its possible connection with inflammatory bowel disease and autism and the seriousness of measles itself, after two outbreaks of the disease in the north and south of England. Tony Blair was under enormous pressure to tell voters whether or not his son Leo had received the triple jab (see 'The continuing saga of MMR').

The NHS received a much-needed shot in the arm last month when the BBC dedicated a whole day of special programmes and much of their news bulletins to the state of the health service, culminating in a face-to-face interview with the Prime Minister. The NHS came out of it rather well, as did Tony Blair (see 'Your NHS: your future').

Earlier in the month the House of Commons health select committee considered evidence submitted to its inquiry on the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. All allegations against NICE were refuted (see 'Not so nice').

It has been another bad month for hospitals – apart from Great Ormond Street children's hospital, which was 150-years-old last month (see 'Happy Birthday dear hospital'). At a hospital in Kent the body of a baby was accidentally thrown out with the laundry. Tabloid newspapers in the UK (not covered in this column) carried dreadful stories of how the baby went through the boil wash (see 'Hospital's horrible mistake').

London teaching hospitals top the infection league table. The first report into MRSA says that one in fifteen hospital deaths is due to infections picked up after admission (see 'More bad news from hospitals').

New research shows that some British children are becoming so overweight that they are developing type 2 diabetes. Too much refined 'fast' food and too little exercise, according to one researcher (see 'Children developing adult diabetes').

Our 'In brief' section has many interesting stories this month, such as Britain's first 'designer baby' and the sad news that the trial of a vaccine to treat Alzheimer's disease has been halted.

The continuing saga of MMR

Two outbreaks of measles, in Tyneside and London, sparked off much media coverage last month in the UK. Words like 'panic' and 'epidemic' were used liberally. The chief medical officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, even accused parents who opted for the single vaccines for measles, mumps and rubella of 'playing Russian roulette' with their children's health. In an attempt to calm matters Professor Donaldson gathered together representatives from nurses and health visitors (who give the jabs), paediatricians, GPs and public health consultants (who treat the disease). He said there was no sound scientific evidence for the theories of Andrew Wakefield, the gastro-enterologist who suggests a link between MMR, inflammatory bowel disease and autism. Professor Donaldson said that experience in the UK and abroad has shown that when vaccines are given individually, coverage falls – sometimes catastrophically. He cited as an example the whooping cough disaster in the UK thirty years ago, following a similar pattern to the present MMR panic. His words fell on deaf ears, however, as national newspapers and TV programmes continued to interview doctors, scientists and concerned parents, and carried out opinion polls. Three out of four parents were shown to think the government should introduce three single jabs instead of the combined vaccine; a growing number are now willing to pay for the single jabs it seems. It appeared that much of the crisis was fanned by media overkill, rather than scientific understanding and reason.

The Committee on Safety of Medicines then met to consider the most recent publications into the safety of the MMR vaccine. Chaired by Professor Alasdair Breckenridge, the independent scientific advisory body reviewed three recent UK-based epidemiological studies looking at more than 500 children with autism. It concluded that current scientific evidence does not support a causal link between MMR vaccination and autism or bowel disease. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, then felt confident enough to endorse the vaccine in a thirteen-page document published on the Downing Street website (NK <http://www.number-10.gov.uk> www.number-10.gov.uk) – although he did not go as far as to say whether or not his 20-month-old son Leo had been given the jab (invoking his established rights



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and privacy on all family matters).

By coincidence the government announced a further £2.5m for research into autism. Health minister Jacqui Smith told a conference on autism at the King's Fund in London that the funds were being given to the Medical Research Council to help them take forward recommendations on research contained in their report on the 'Epidemiology and Causes of Autism'. The MMR vaccine was not mentioned in the Department of Health press release.

Finally, perhaps by unfortunate timing, the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline announced that the contentious MMR vaccine could soon become the MMRV vaccine as a chickenpox (varicella) jab is added to it. The company said that its 'superjab' would be submitted for approval with the European regulatory authorities later this year, and that it could be in use as early as 2003. The jab has been tested successfully in the US and offers good protection.

• *The Times* 2nd, 9th, 16th February, *Guardian* 7th February, BBC Online, Press releases (DoH)

Not so nice

The House of Commons health select committee has been considering evidence submitted to its inquiry on the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), the Special Health Authority for England and Wales set up in April 1999. Patient groups and prescribing experts have suggested that NICE's process of evaluating drugs and treatments was seriously flawed, and that the evidence used was often inaccurate. The committee also heard claims that the choice of drugs to evaluate was often inappropriate and caused problems at health authority level, because they were looked at in isolation from other drugs and treatment. NICE Chair Professor Sir Michael Rawlins rejected all the allegations telling MPs, 'We do not believe our guidance is flawed. It is constructed to a very robust process. Probably more robust than any analogous type of activity anywhere in the world.' NICE appraisals committee Chair, Professor David Barnett, refuted suggestions that some recommendations for drug usage had been contrary to drug licence indications. He also denied the allegation that guidance on Herceptin, used to treat breast cancer, had been 'inexplicably' delayed for six months, resulting in the unnecessary deaths of possibly hundreds of women. NICE's chief executive, Andrew Dillon, told the select committee that there were plans to publish interim guidance when a drug was being appraised. This, he said, would solve the problem of 'NICE blight' when the use of drugs other than those being assessed were put on hold.

During the hearing, committee member MP Sandra

Gidley told NICE representatives it worried her, 'how much this committee has been misinformed'. It was also suggested that the committee had been given 'duff' evidence. However, Ms Gidley later said she thought it was likely that the committee would endorse NICE's proposals to make its appraisals and appeals processes even more transparent and open. It is expected that a consultation document will recommend greater independence for NICE from ministerial decisions on whether drugs and treatments should be available across the country. The inquiry can be seen on NICE's website www.nice.org.uk.

Meanwhile NICE has reviewed the situation regarding drugs given to patients with multiple sclerosis. As we reported last month NICE decided that the drugs beta interferon and glatiramer acetate should not be given on prescription. However, it has been announced that from May this year this decision could be reversed as part of a unique 'payment by results' agreement between the Department of Health and five pharmaceutical companies. The scheme allows products to be prescribed to patients who meet criteria devised by the Association of British Neurologists (ABN), including those with secondary progressive MS in which relapses are the dominant feature as long as they meet the ABN criteria. Implementation of the scheme will be a major undertaking and it may take some time before all potentially eligible patients can be assessed. To help with implementation all the companies involved have agreed to help fund some of the additional specialist nurses who will be needed.

• Press release (DoH), *Health Service Journal* 7th February

'Your NHS: your future'

This was the title of a BBC programme in February, which ran from six o'clock in the morning until late that night. *The Times* described it as 'public-service broadcasting with a vengeance'. The entire day was given over to programmes on or about the health service; even the popular programme *This is Your Life* was devoted to cancer specialists (and twin brothers) Professors Trevor and Ray Powles from the Royal Marsden hospital in London. A live programme broadcast from a London teaching hospital linked to other hospitals across the country, giving patients and health professionals the chance to express their views on the health service. A telephone poll, run in the style of a political election, asked viewers to choose their top five priorities for the health service. Although the NHS Plan had said, 'the public's top concern about the NHS is waiting for treatment', viewers put free long-term care for the elderly at the top of the list, followed by pay for NHS workers.

The overwhelming impression as the day wore on was of an NHS service staffed by people of extraordinary commitment, stamina and skill. It was certainly an antidote to

the barrage of criticism directed at the ‘third world NHS’ by press and politicians alike. If it proved one thing it was that there is no clear, single view of what was wrong with the NHS or what needed to change. Late into the evening the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, joined in to debate this. He was never seriously put on the spot, but allowed to say that things were getting better – and to promise that there would be no direct charges for medical care while he remained in charge. He also signalled a move away from the tax cutting agenda of the past two decades by saying Britain would have to pay more in general taxation if it wanted world class health services.

• BBC Online, *Guardian* 21st February

More NHS news

It seems that Downing Street is finally convinced that the public will not punish a government that openly admits it is increasing the burden of taxation to improve public services. Shortly after Tony Blair’s appearance on TV his party announced it was backing a £4bn health increase by 2005 in a dramatic tax rise designed to meet the pledge to bring spending in line with the European Union average. Speaking to health service Chairmen the Health Secretary Alan Milburn said, ‘If we want sustained investment in the NHS then we will need to pay for it. I believe the best way of doing that – because it is the fairest and most efficient way of doing it – is through general taxation.’ The favoured sources for the extra NHS money is £1bn by raising the upper earnings limit, and a further £3bn by raising the employee’s national insurance rate from ten per cent to eleven per cent. The opposition parties gave the news a mixed reception. Conservative health spokesman, Liam Fox, at first said his party might support increases in tax, but later refined his position to say there needed to be reform before tax. Charles Kennedy, the Liberal Democrat leader, accused Labour of selling a false prospectus at the general election although he did say, ‘One should always welcome a sinner who repents!’

Patients are to be sent to recover in bed-and-breakfast establishments in the country to free more hospital beds. The aim is to fill spare holiday accommodation during traditionally quiet periods while tackling the problems of bed-blocking. A shortage of NHS hospital beds has resulted in cancelled operations for 500,000 people in the last five years. The plan could save the NHS thousands of pounds in patient care as it costs on average £1,000 for a week’s stay in hospital. A pilot scheme is to be launched in Shropshire and Worcestershire and will be closely monitored.

Four hospital trusts failing to meet government performance targets are to be taken over by more successful NHS executives. They were among twelve hospital trusts

which got a ‘no star’ rating in league tables published last year and have not done enough since then to improve the service they offer to patients. Management jobs at these hospitals are now being ‘put out to tender’ to other NHS managers; the ‘franchises’ will last three years. While the government carried out its threat to get tough with failing trusts, it stopped short of a more controversial proposal to bring in the private sector to turn around the hospitals. The NHS Trusts named are Ashford and St Peter’s, Dartford and Gravesham, Portsmouth Hospitals, and Barnet and Chase Farm, London.

New statistics for 2000–2001 indicate a range of striking improvements and relatively few negatives in the NHS generally. The Department of Health measured the performance of health authorities and individual hospital trusts across a range of nearly eighty indicators. They reveal wide variations in the performance of hospitals and general levels of health in different parts of the country. The statistics show, for the first time, which trusts have improved or got worse over the period. Figures reveal that the problem of ‘bed-blocking’ is not disappearing, despite the government allocating £300m over the next three years to help free up beds. On the positive side, however, there is a significant reduction in the number of people who die within thirty days of planned surgery. More patients are surviving colon, lung and breast cancer, and fewer people are dying in the thirty days following emergency surgery. Alan Milburn, the Health Secretary, welcomed the data. He said, ‘These figures show that while there are many problems facing the NHS, progress is under way.’

• *The Times* 2nd, 9th February, BBC Online, *Guardian* 12th February

Children developing adult diabetes

The first cases of type 2 diabetes have been found in overweight white children in the UK. Type 2 diabetes occurs when fat and muscle cells in particular lose their sensitivity to insulin, the hormone that regulates blood glucose. It is rare in children, and so far has only been diagnosed in those from ethnic minority groups, who are known to be at greater risk. The research was carried out by teams from the Royal Hospital for Children, Bristol, and Southampton University Hospitals Trust. Researcher Dr Julian Shield said, ‘We need a major initiative to combat the increasing obesity of our childhood population. Children have too many snacks, too much refined, easy access food and take far too little exercise both at school and at home.’ Bill Hartnett of *Diabetes UK* said, ‘Type 2 diabetes in children is already recognised as a major problem in the United States. Unless we take action now to have our children eating a

more healthy diet and doing more exercise we will follow the American example.'

If this trend continues the worry is that it will place a serious burden on the health service in years to come. However, a spokesman for the Department of Health said initiatives were already in place to combat obesity in children. Nutritional standards in school meals were being tackled and a scheme was in operation to provide school-children with free fruit.

• BBC Online

Happy Birthday dear hospital

One of the world's top children's hospitals – Great Ormond Street in London – celebrated its 150th birthday last month. The occasion was marked by visits from both The Queen and Prime Minister Tony Blair. Great Ormond Street was the first hospital in the UK to offer inpatient treatment to children only and now deals with 22,000 inpatients, in addition to 77,000 outpatients every year. The hospital specialises in helping children with epilepsy who require brain operations, brain tumour operations and the latest heart surgery techniques for children. It has pioneered other groundbreaking techniques in paediatric cancer, juvenile arthritis and HIV in children. The Institute of Child Health, which is linked to the hospital, was recently awarded the maximum score by the government for its academic work.

Great Ormond Street needs millions of pounds to continue its work and much of this is raised via fundraising. However, one source of income is its ownership of the rights to the JM Barrie classic *Peter Pan*, which it was bequeathed by the owner.

• BBC Online

BMJ journals free to the developing world

The BMJ publishing group has for the last year been providing free access to the electronic version of its 23 specialist journals to anybody in the 50 poorest countries in the world. The BMJ itself and the student BMJ are free to everyone everywhere. The BMJ publishing group has just announced that access to its twenty-three journals has just been extended to a further fifty countries in the lower middle income group including your country. Within a few weeks and once technical problems have been solved free access will be provided to Clinical Evidence, an evidence based compendium of answers to commonly asked clinical questions. Further information can be found on

the BMJ website www.bmj.com The article is by Richard Smith and Alex Williamson in the issue of the 16th February 2002

A list of the twenty-three journals can be found at www.bmj.com/template.cfm?name=specjou.

Backward step for morning after pill?

A High Court bid has been launched to halt sales of emergency contraception over-the-counter at pharmacists. Since the beginning of last year women over the age of sixteen have been able to buy the 'morning after' pill, known as Levonelle, without needing to see a doctor first – previously it was only available on prescription from a doctor. The anti-abortion group, the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) claim that emergency contraception is in fact a method of early abortion and, as such, should be subject to abortion legislation. They will ask the court to consider what is the precise moment at which a woman becomes pregnant. Is it when the egg is fertilised, or when the resulting embryo is implanted in the womb? If it is the former, then the court could rule that emergency contraception causes a miscarriage and is illegal.

The Department of Health argues that emergency contraception is safe and effective and the British Medical Association support the drug being made available over-the-counter on the grounds that it may stop unwanted pregnancies. The British Pregnancy Advisory Service says a ruling in favour of the legal challenge would be disastrous.– The pharmaceutical company Schering, who manufacture Levonelle, are planning an advertising campaign in glossy women's magazines after a survey of women found only forty per cent knew the emergency contraceptive pill was available from chemists.

• BBC Online

Hospital's horrible mistake

The UK news was dominated at the beginning of February with the story of a Kent hospital that lost the remains of a dead baby. Queen Mary's Hospital in Sidcup suspended a mortuary worker after the error and announced an enquiry into procedures. The mistake was discovered when undertakers went to collect the body of James Fernandez who was only 1lb 1oz when he was born seventeen weeks premature; he died from natural causes an hour after he was delivered. A police investigation found the child's body

on a conveyor belt at an industrial cleaning firm, where it was disclosed he had been put through a washing cycle for contaminated clothes.

Such was the strength of feeling at this awful story that it had extensive media coverage. The Prime Minister's official spokesman said Tony Blair sympathised greatly with the trauma suffered by the baby's family, but added that, 'It's worth remembering that this is the exception not the rule. The NHS on the whole delivers very, very high quality care in relation to maternity and child services.' The Conservative MP for Old Bexley and Sidcup said reassurances needed to be given by ministers that stringent measures were in place across the NHS for dealing with bodies. Although the hospital gave their unreserved apologies the baby's family, from Swanley in Kent, said they were considering legal action.

• BBC Online

More bad news from hospitals

A north London hospital admitted that 2,700 patients had faced delays of up to a year in being screened for tumours, cysts, gallstones and other conditions. Elizabeth Heyer, the chief executive of the Barnet and Chase Farm hospital trust resigned, and the consultant radiologist responsible for ultrasound scanning at the Chase Farm site in Enfield was understood to have been suspended while the failures were investigated. In September, the trust was named as one of the worst twelve performing hospitals in England. The Department of Health said its organisation was now under urgent review.

London teaching hospitals top the infection league table, according to the first national report into hospital infections caused by the potentially fatal methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA). About 100,000 patients a year pick up infections in hospitals, of which about fifteen per cent are preventable. It is estimated that one in fifteen hospital deaths is due to infections picked up after admission. Last year Alan Milburn, the Health Secretary, admitted that MRSA was endemic in hospitals in England after the number of cases went up from sixty-seven in 1990 to 3,110 in 1999. Health experts blame poor hospital sanitation and the over-use of antibiotics. The full report can be found in the Public Health Laboratory Service Communicable Disease Report at www.phls.co.uk.

A new £67m privately financed hospital in Bishop Auckland, Darlington may be merged with another before it has even opened. The Royal Colleges said the hospital's catchment area and caseload were too small to support and train the range of experienced doctors needed for

emergency care – which means the hospital will be unable to offer full acute services. Nearby is the £97m PFI hospital of North Durham. It is so short of beds ten months after opening that it is unable to meet its waiting list targets. The health authority drafted in the Department of Health modernisation adviser Professor Ara Darzi to conduct an emergency review of services in Darlington and Durham County. He proposed a merger between Bishop Auckland and Durham hospitals but this was rejected by surgeons at North Durham hospital as being unsafe. Prof Darzi's report has been sent to ministers for consideration.

• *Guardian* 7th/8th February, *The Times* 9th February, Press release (DoH)

In brief

– Dozens of UK patients are now travelling to Lille in France each week for joint and cataract operations. This follows a European Court of Justice ruling that patients facing undue delay for treatment in one EU country may seek it in another. Three women in their sixties have now been sent to the Lutherhaus hospital in Essen, Germany for knee replacement operations. Unions have condemned the plan as a 'drop in the waiting list ocean'. The NHS may take out contracts with other hospitals in Europe, possibly as far away as Greece or Malta. In a reversal of the scheme the government has announced it is to bring teams of German doctors and nurses to the UK to perform 'conveyor belt' operations at a fast-track surgery unit for NHS patients being set up at a military hospital in Portsmouth.

• *The Times* 2nd February, *Guardian* 12th February

– It's official – cod liver oil is good for the joints. Professor Bruce Caterson, from the School of Biomedicine at Cardiff University, says taking the supplement could delay, or even reverse, the destruction of joint cartilage and inflammatory pain associated with arthritic disease. Researchers believe it could even delay joint replacement surgery. Although it is traditionally associated with old age, one in 1,000 children suffers from arthritis; severe arthritis causes significant disability for over three million people. Fergus Logan, chief executive of the Arthritis Research Campaign, which partly funded the research, said, 'We're delighted that something as simple and non-controversial as cod liver oil has the potential to bring relief and restore quality of life to so many people who suffer from osteoarthritis.'

• BBC Online

– Airlines and holiday companies are to be encouraged to

- step up skin cancer warnings to passengers on their way to sunshine holiday destinations. The campaign to reinforce messages about the dangers of skin cancer and eye cataracts from the sun's rays is being planned by the government, cancer charities and other groups. The National Radiological Protection Board believes the popularity of overseas holidays in the last thirty years lies behind big increases in the number of deaths from skin cancer – about 2,000 a year.
- *Guardian* 6th February
 - The work of school nurses is being compromised by the enormous pressures created by the meningitis C immunisation campaign. A report from the Royal College of Nursing says that more than three quarters of those questioned said on-going work had been affected 'considerably' or 'had been taken over completely' by the immunisation programme. It is feared that with sex education a key element of the nurses' job, there could be a rise in teenage pregnancies.
 - BBC Online
 - The number of cases of kidney cancer has risen by sixty-eight per cent over the last twenty years. Figures from Cancer Research UK show that over 5,700 people are now affected by the disease in Britain each year and survival rates are among the lowest in Europe. Experts estimate that up to forty per cent of cases of kidney cancer are caused by smoking. However, the disease is also linked to other risk factors, such as obesity and high blood pressure. Early detection is the key to successful treatment; kidney cancer expert, Dr Nick James, said that it was vital that people who noticed traces of blood in their urine visited their GP as soon as possible.
 - BBC Online
 - The anti-impotence drug Viagra could become available over the counter later this year as one of many prescription-only medicines being review by the Medicines Control Agency. The government wants more medicines to be available in pharmacies.
 - *The Times* 9th February
 - The BBC was accused of scaremongering about the dangers of biological terrorism in a drama-documentary, *Smallpox 2002: Silent Weapon* shown last month. The programme showed a lone terrorist setting loose the smallpox virus in New York. The disease spread around the world within days, leading to the death of 60 million people. The figures were challenged by scientists who said it was alarmist and exaggerated the dangers of biological attack.
 - *The Times* 2nd February
 - British parents pay the highest childcare costs in Europe, according to a recently released Daycare Trust report. In a national survey of childcare bills the charity found that a typical nursery place cost over £6,000 a year – a rise of almost ten per cent on last year. Demand for childcare far outstripped supply, with only one place for every seven children under eight. The government's national childcare strategy, currently under review, pledged to provide one million places for 1.6 million children by 2004. Places were increasing, but very slowly, the trust said.
 - *Guardian* 6th February
 - Cough remedies available over-the-counter should not be recommended by doctors because they are not effective, according to a scientific study published in the *British Medical Journal*. Researchers found fifteen trials looking at the effectiveness of all types of cough medicine. In nine out of the fifteen, using the treatment achieved no better results than a non-active mixture given to a different group of patients.
 - BBC Online
 - Diane Blood, the widow who fought a two-year court battle for the right to have her late husband's child, is pregnant for a second time using his sperm. Mrs Blood had treatment at the same Brussels clinic where she conceived her son Liam, now three; the second baby is due in July. In February 1997 the appeal court ruled that Mrs Blood could take her husband's sperm abroad for treatment after her determined battle against the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. It had refused permission for Stephen Blood's sperm to be used, as he had not given written consent before his death from meningitis.
 - *Guardian* 9th February
 - England rugby star Austin Healey and top athlete Kelly Holmes announced they are backing a Europe-wide campaign aimed at people who want to give up smoking. Meanwhile, in Warsaw, Public health minister Yvette Cooper joined health ministers and deputy ministers from 47 countries at a key conference on a tobacco-free Europe run by the World Health Organisation. Copies of the Declaration and country profiles are available on the WHO website at www.who.euro.int.
 - Press release (DoH)
 - The Department of Health has announced that it will give £300,000 extra funding to Childline over the next two years. This additional funding will enable Childline to expand its pool of trained volunteer telephone counsellors, thereby improving the service for children and

young people seeking support. The organisation currently has over 930 volunteer counsellors working at bases around the UK. They receive thorough initial and ongoing training, support and supervision to enable them to offer children a service they can trust. Except in situations where the child is judged to be in extreme danger, the service is child-led and confidential.

- Press release (DoH)
- A worrying result of the third Royal College of Physicians' survey of consultant physicians who treat emergency patients is that over half those surveyed stated that their job satisfaction was either poor or moderate. Less than half replied it was either good or excellent. The results were broadly similar across all age groups of physicians and across the major specialities. RCP President Professor Sir George Alberti said, 'The results are indeed disturbing. Many of the problems will, however, diminish with the forecasted substantial increase in consultant numbers, but before then there is a difficult period to overcome in the next two to three years.'
- Press release (Royal College of Physicians)
- Tobacco advertising in the press, on billboards and on the internet is likely to be banned this summer, following a government decision to back a private bill launched by the Liberal Democrat peer Lord Clement-Jones. Although the government has not confirmed its support the bill is expected to clear the House of Lords early this month. New controls will also give the government greater controls over point-of-sale advertising and put Britain in line with sixteen other European countries over direct tobacco promotion. It is understood, however, that motor racing will have exemption from any tobacco sponsorship ban until 2006.
- *Guardian* 15th February
- A pioneering trial of a vaccine to treat Alzheimer's disease has been halted after twelve patients became seriously ill with inflammation of the brain. The trial has been stopped while these findings are reviewed by an independent committee. This is a serious disappointment to hopes of treating Alzheimer's, which affects about 400,000 people in Britain. Eighty British patients were due to get the vaccine in a trial launched by its developer, the Irish company Elan.
- *The Times* 23rd February
- The parents of a boy who suffers from thalassaemia major, a potentially rare blood disorder, have been given permission to use genetic screening and IVF to create a baby whose tissues would match that of their son. This will be the first case of a 'designer baby' in Britain. Ruth

Deech, from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, said, 'This does not set a precedent. The authority will only approve the treatment in very rare circumstances and under strict controls.'

- *The Times* 23rd February
- NHS Direct came under criticism after misdiagnosing meningitis in a baby girl. At the inquest into the death of four-week-old Jordan Billings the coroner said her mother had been lulled into a false sense of security when a nurse on the NHS telephone helpline said the child was probably suffering from colic. Her wrong advice contributed to a 12-hour delay before the baby was taken to hospital and seen by a doctor. She was found to have bacterial meningitis and died five days later. A national audit office inquiry concluded that NHS Direct 'is operating safely and advice to callers errs on the side of caution'. It found that the service had twenty-nine 'adverse events' in its first three years, which was fewer than one case per 160,000 calls.
- BBC Online

People

- Health minister Lord Philip Hunt has welcomed Dr Stephen Bain to the Human Genetics Commission. He replaces Professor Bruce Ponder, who left the Commission in June 2001. The Human Genetics Commission advises government on current and potential developments in human genetics and the likely impact on human health and healthcare, as well as the social, ethical, legal and economic implications. Dr Bain's major research interest is the genetic analysis of diabetic nephropathy.
- The new Chair of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority is Suzi Leather. Ms Leather is also currently the Deputy Chair of the Food Standards Agency, a role she will continue alongside her new appointment. She will be joined at the HFEA by Professor Christopher Barratt, Scientific Director of the Assisted Conception Unit at Birmingham's Women's Hospital.
- Health minister Jacqui Smith has announced the appointment of Rodney Brooke CBE as the first substantive Chair of the General Social Care Council. The GSCC has been established to raise the quality of social care services for vulnerable people and improve performance.
- Nigel Pleming QC is to chair the Independent Inquiry into how NHS services in Yorkshire dealt with concerns raised about two doctors – Dr William Kerr and Mr Michael Haslam. Dr Kerr, a psychiatrist practising in Yorkshire, was suspended from the medical register in April 2001 following allegations that he had indecently assaulted a highly vulnerable psychiatric patient. Alle-

gations were also made against another consultant psychiatrist working in the area, Mr Haslam – he voluntarily erased his name from the medical register in 1999.

- Secretary of State for Health Alan Milburn has announced the appointment of trustees to the vCJD Trust,

which has been set up to administer the compensation scheme for those who have been diagnosed with vCJD and their families. The Chairman of the Trust will be Sir Robert Owen QC.

- Press releases (DoH)