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## Health in the news

Chancellor Gordon Brown had certainly prepared the British populace for some unwelcome news in the Budget Statement last month. And so it came to pass that national insurance payments went up to help pay for a state-of-the-art National Health Service (see 'Budget gives the NHS the "kiss of life"'). There was much written about this aspect of the chancellor's statement (see 'After the budget') and the Royal College of Nursing's well-timed annual conference did not waste the opportunity to say how much they needed more money (see 'The crucial role of nurses in the NHS'), to encourage them into the profession and keep them there. More obstetricians and gynaecologists are needed too and one in ten consultants in A & E wards are said to have felt suicidal (see 'NHS consultants: too few and too stressed').

April also saw the reorganisation of the NHS (see 'The birth of the primary care trust') with Health Secretary, Alan Milburn, urging hospitals to be honest about where their money is spent to give the new Primary Care Trusts a better informed commissioning role.

Much excitement was felt about the dawn of gene therapy with a touching story about an 18-month-old boy being able to come out of his sterile world after treatment to cure his inability to develop an immune system (see "'Bubble baby' freed by gene therapy').

Therapies to aid smokers in giving up the habit are now to be available on prescription, following NICE guidance on their effectiveness. It may also not be long before the familiar tobacco names on the sides of racing cars disappear (see 'More encouragement to help smokers quit').

All in all a busy month in the UK.

## Budget gives the NHS the 'kiss of life'

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, delivered the annual Budget Statement on April 17<sup>th</sup>. It might have been better phrased the 'Health Statement' as the NHS formed the centrepiece with the chancellor announcing £40 billion of extra investment over the next five years. At the end of that time Britain's spending should be level with that of France and Germany. The extra funding will be paid for by increased National Insurance contributions from both companies and employees. There was speculation that cabinet ministers of other government departments were less than happy at the announcement as their spending allocation was set to rise by only 2.5% a year over the next three years.

The chancellor had accepted the recommendations of a report into the future of the NHS by Derek Wanless, the former NatWest bank chief executive. His report, 'Securing our Future Health: Taking a Long Term View', said the health service had been underfunded by £200 billion over the last thirty years and called for NHS spending to double by 2022. Mr Wanless said spending on the NHS should rise from £69 billion to £184 billion a year. His report, commissioned by the Treasury, was the first major review of the future needs of the NHS since it was established in 1948. As part of his review Mr Wanless compared the performance of the NHS with health systems in a variety of other countries, including Australia, Canada and the US. He examined the impact of people living longer, and improvements in technology and treatments on the NHS over the next two decades. Mr Wanless also called for major increases in the numbers of nurses and doctors, improvements in the way staff work, improvements in IT, and in the integration between health and social care. Gordon Brown said the Wanless report supported his approach and was a 'chance in a generation' to bring the NHS up to world standards. His aim was to 'make our NHS the best insurance policy in the world'.

## After the budget

Following the budget Health Secretary Alan Milburn made a statement to the House of Commons outlining the key changes needed to ensure the investment delivered a world



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class health service. He also announced the publication of 'Delivering the NHS Plan – next steps on investment; next steps on reform'. This, Mr Milburn said, set out 'a completely new way of running the service'. Waiting times for operations and in A & E would fall, extra investment in major conditions would cut cancer and cardiac death rates, and services in mental health and for older people would be improved. By 2008 the Health Secretary envisaged increases in all NHS jobs, primary care services would be expanded and more elective surgery would take place in new freestanding surgical units or 'diagnostic and treatment centres'. Hospital capacity would grow by at least 10,000 more general and acute beds.

In a response to Gordon Brown's proposal for tax rises to fund NHS investment, Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith argued that the NHS could not be saved in its present form. He said Britain was 'further away from the ideals of the NHS than at any other time in its history'. The Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy, however, welcomed the chancellor's planned tax rise although he said it had come 'anything up to five years too late'.

The media found plenty to write about after Gordon Brown's budget. Most commentators wondered if, even with all the new resources, the NHS in its present form could deliver the modern service envisaged by Derek Wanless and his team. There is a question mark over whether or not the NHS has the management skills to bring about fundamental changes in the culture of the organisation and in its ability to deliver a more patient-orientated service. There is also the divide between health and social care which is seen as a huge stumbling block to delivering high quality care.

Finally, perhaps by strange coincidence, a report by the health think-tank, the King's Fund, accused the government of interfering too much in the running of the health service. In an analysis of how the Labour government has managed the NHS since it came to power in 1997, the report says Tony Blair and his ministers have given an impression of 'relentless, almost hyperactive intervention'. Ministers, it says, should 'stop making heroic promises and buckle down to the unglamorous detail of building a good enough health service for the 21<sup>st</sup> century'.

• *Guardian* 18<sup>th</sup> April, Press releases (DoH), BBC Online

## The crucial role of nurses in the NHS

Nurses have had a very high profile following the budget. At the Royal College of Nursing annual congress in Harrogate, general secretary Dr Beverley Malone, said nurses were pivotal to the government's ambitious plans for

upgrading the NHS and this must be recognised by improvements in pay, welfare and working conditions. Dr Malone agreed that the government had met its election pledges to recruit more nurses to the NHS, but, she said, 'I see a great need for emphasis on retaining and keeping the mature nurses right in the NHS'. John Austin, a Labour member of the Commons Health Select Committee agrees with the nurses' campaign for more pay. 'I do believe that nurses have been underpaid for many, many years,' he said. 'Unless we can recruit and retain skilled staff patient care will suffer.' However, the NHS Confederation, which represents health service managers, has warned that the reform ministers want to see in the NHS will not take place if a large part of the £40 billion investment announced by the Chancellor in the budget is eaten up by pay rises.

The case for better pay for nurses received some encouragement in the form of a paper published in the *British Medical Journal*. Researchers from the Department of Primary Care at the University of Bristol found that patients were more satisfied with the care they received from a nurse than from their GP. A review of thirty-four studies found nurse practitioners – specially trained nurses – offered longer consultations and carried out more investigations than doctors. They offered more advice on self-care and managing conditions, and scored better on communications than doctors.

The role of nurses in GP surgeries has been expanded recently. Nurse prescribing was first piloted on a limited basis in 1994. By September 2001 more than 22,000 district nurses, health visitors, and practice nurses had been trained to prescribe from a limited list. Now specially trained 'nurse prescribers' will, for the first time, be allowed to write prescriptions for a wide range of drugs including antibiotics for infections.

Sadly, after all this encouragement, a poll published recently in the *Nursing Times* says that three-quarters of nurses think the NHS is no longer safe in the hands of a Labour government. However, it should be pointed out that the survey was based on replies by 1,455 nurses to a questionnaire in the magazine and could not be guaranteed to be a statistically representative example.

• BBC Online, Press releases (DoH), *Guardian* 16<sup>th</sup> April

## The birth of the primary care trust

The 1<sup>st</sup> April was the start of what has been described as 'one of the most momentous changes in NHS history'. However, possibly because of the death of the Queen Mother it had little media attention. The NHS reorganisation saw the disappearance of almost 100 health authori-

ties (HAs) and primary care groups last month and the emergence of 138 primary care trusts (PCTs) as the cornerstones of the health service. The PCTs will take on many of the responsibilities of HAs – including commissioning, public health and primary care – and hold three-quarters of the NHS budget for England. Many will also be running community services.

Health Secretary Alan Milburn has urged hospital trusts to ‘open their books properly’ so the new wave of primary care trusts can have a stronger and better informed commissioning role. The National Association for Primary Care welcomed Mr Milburn’s words as ‘a step in the right direction’. A spokesperson said, ‘A lot of money is ploughed into secondary care and it has not always been clear how well that money is being spent.’ The PCTs have a breathing space now until October before they take on all of their legal duties – it is thought that many will need it.

• *Health Service Journal* 4<sup>th</sup> April

## ‘Bubble baby’ freed by gene therapy

Scientists at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London have successfully treated an 18-month-old boy, who had a condition preventing him from developing an immune system. The disease, called severe combined immunodeficiency (SCID), is caused by a single mutated gene, and meant that Rhys Evans had to live in sterile conditions or risk picking up a life-threatening infection. The type of SCID that Rhys had is caused by a fault in a gene on the X chromosome which stops the development of T cells, a key part of the immune system. The disease affects boys because they only have one X chromosome. A bone marrow transplant can cure the disease, but suitable donors are only found in a third of cases – one was not found for Rhys.

The Great Ormond Street team, led by Dr Adrian Thrasher, took bone marrow from the boy, then used a virus to carry a new version of the gene into immune cells from the marrow. It was then re-implanted into the patient, where it gradually began to generate further cells to pass into the bloodstream and protect him from infection. He now has a normal count of immune cells for a child of his age, and doctors are hopeful this will continue.

• *New Scientist* 6<sup>th</sup> April, BBC Online

## Breast cancer: research and new treatments

Older women who are overweight may be more likely to get breast cancer, according to a study which found that high levels of sex hormones, which are more common in

those who are overweight, can double the risk. The paper, published by scientists from Cancer Research UK’s epidemiology unit in Oxford, pooled data from nine separate studies, which included 765 post-menopausal health women and 663 with breast cancer. They found that those who had high levels of testosterone or free estradiol – an active form of oestrogen – in their blood had more than twice the risk of breast cancer of those who did not.

Inheriting a damaged version of a gene nearly doubles a woman’s chance of developing breast cancer, according to researchers from Cambridge University. The scientists have pinpointed a faulty version of a gene called CHK2, which appears to be one of a number of genes that can combine to increase the risk of breast cancer.

Following the approval by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence of the breast cancer drug trastuzumab (Herceptin), a new pill for the treatment of advanced breast cancer has been launched in the UK. The drug, capecitabine, can be used on its own in women who have already received intensive cancer treatment, or in combination with another cancer drug called docetaxel. Taken together the two drugs have been shown to increase survival time for women whose cancer has spread to other parts of their body. Capecitabine has still to be submitted to and approved by NICE before it will be widely available on the NHS. It is marketed in the UK under the brand name Xeloda by the pharmaceutical firm Roche.

• *Guardian* 18<sup>th</sup> April, BBC Online

## Final chapter in a story of two ex-doctors

In December 2000, GP Clifford Ayling was convicted of thirteen counts of indecent assault on ten patients and jailed for four years; he was later struck off the General Medical Council register. Last month he was allowed out of jail to conduct his own defence in civil litigation brought by sixteen women who had been sexually assaulted by him. At Canterbury Crown Court in Kent, Ayling cross-examined some of his former patients himself, provoking anger and distress in the witness box. At the end of the hearing the women were awarded damages totalling £256,250.

A plastic surgeon, accused of being ‘a psychopath and not fit to operate’ by fellow doctors, has withdrawn his registration as a doctor in Britain and plans to continue practising abroad. David Herbert was suspended from practising two years ago by the GMC. He had been due to go before their Performance Procedures Committee in April to decide if his suspension should continue. By withdrawing from the GMC register, Mr Herbert, of Southwell in

Nottinghamshire, faces no further sanction from the Council. He now intends to work with leprosy patients in Africa. The case highlights the lack of global regulation for doctors. The GMC only provides details on doctors registered in Britain on request, and this itself is limited by privacy laws.

• *Guardian* 12<sup>th</sup> April, *The Times* 13<sup>th</sup> April

## More encouragement to help smokers quit

The government's approach to helping people give up smoking has been boosted by the publication of guidance from NICE on the effectiveness of aids to smoking cessation. The Department of Health asked NICE to advise on the clinical and cost effectiveness of bupropion (Zyban) and Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT). NICE have advised that both these therapies are not only clinically effective, but are among the most cost effective of all healthcare interventions. An explosion in the use of Zyban and other NRT therapies such as patches, gums, lozenges and inhalers is now expected. NICE believes the move could double the number of smokers who quit the habit, and the extra £20 to £56 million expected on the annual drugs bill for England and Wales would be more than offset by huge savings in the £1.5 billion spent a year on treating smoking-related diseases which kill more than 300 people a day.

Every health authority will now be obliged to make money available for the treatment – this was optional before. Most NRT products were available over-the-counter in pharmacies, except Zyban, which was only available on private prescription after safety concerns were raised following the deaths of fifty-eight people while taking the drug. NICE accepts its ruling will increase the workload in smoking cessation clinics run by doctors and nurses, but says that in the long term GPs should have to see fewer patients made seriously ill by smoking.

The government has also announced that it will take the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill through the Commons. The proposed legislation will ban press, billboard and internet advertising of tobacco products and will prohibit the promotion of smoking through free distribution of tobacco products, coupons and mailshots. It will place restrictions on the display and promotion of tobacco products in shops, through regulations made under the bill. The legislation will also bring an end to sponsorship by tobacco companies of sporting and other events.

–More than a thousand Londoners alone die from coronary heart disease every year because of passive smoking, a report says. The London Assembly's Smoking in Public

Places Committee found that people in the capital visited smoky public places, such as pubs, clubs or restaurants, two or three times a week.

• *Guardian* 12<sup>th</sup> April, Press releases (DoH), BBC Online

## NHS consultants: too few and too stressed

A staffing emergency in gynaecology will hit the NHS within two years, according to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG). The number of training posts in obstetrics and gynaecology has continued to fall over the past three years, leaving the speciality facing a considerable deficit of consultants. At present there are not enough junior doctors to provide adequate levels of service cover on wards, or enough qualified doctors to fill vacant consultancy posts in the coming years.

Consultants working in accident and emergency departments are stressed out and one in ten has contemplated suicide, according to research. The study published in *Emergency Medicine Journal* found that A & E consultants have stress levels that are twice as high as the rest of their colleagues. Dr Susan Robinson, herself an A & E consultant at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, surveyed 350 of the UK's 479 emergency medicine consultants. She said the findings were unsurprising and urged action to improve the working conditions of A & E doctors.

• *The Times* 13<sup>th</sup> April, BBC Online

## Problems of working mothers

Women who work during pregnancy are almost five times more likely to develop pre-eclampsia, a potentially fatal condition that causes abnormally high blood pressure, according to a report published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. The results of the study of 933 women using the Rotunda maternity hospital in Dublin will reinforce speculation that work stress might increase stress hormones and trigger a nervous response that raises blood pressure. More women than ever are choosing to work outside the home during pregnancy; the effect of this trend on them and their babies remains controversial.

Once the babies arrive it seems that women are finding it extremely difficult to juggle the demands of motherhood and career, particularly women who leave motherhood until the late thirties. A survey for *Mother and Baby* magazine questioned 1,000 UK mothers with an average age of thirty. It found that many mothers are struggling

to cope on five hours sleep a night, the consequent sleep deprivation playing havoc with their relationships and their working lives.

- *Guardian* 18<sup>th</sup> April, BBC Online

## Appointment

Dr David Graham, Postgraduate Dean, Merseyside Deanery, has been appointed as Chair of a Steering Group to oversee the implementation of appraisal for all doctors in the NHS. The Department of Health in England has introduced the appraisal process to give doctors regular feedback on past performance and continuing progress, and to identify education and development needs. However, the appraisals could be at risk if primary care trusts refuse to fund doctors. The British Medical Association says it knows of at least two unnamed trusts which have said they will not pay for the assessments and under GPs' terms of service there is no requirement for them to pay themselves.

- *Health Service Journal* 4<sup>th</sup> April, Press release (DoH)

## In brief

– Five air ambulance charities in England are to receive a £2.2 million funding boost to help with their operational costs. In addition, the NHS will meet the cost of approximately £150,000 for staffing every air ambulance in England with a paramedic crew. Announcing the funding, health minister Hazel Blears said she hoped the money would help support the running costs of local air ambulance charities until they had funding from other public and corporate sources.

- Press release (DoH)
- Fraud officers from three police forces launched dawn raids on the homes and offices of hundreds of drug firm staff as part of an investigation into a suspected plot to defraud the NHS of £400 million. The searches focused on six companies involved in the manufacture and sale of generic drugs to pharmacists. The pharmacists are later reimbursed by the NHS. The serious fraud office said it was investigating prices charged by suppliers for prescribed penicillin-based antibiotics and warfarin sodium, a blood-thinning drug used to treat heart problems.
- *Guardian* 11<sup>th</sup> April

– Existing guidelines on treating patients with diseases such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) do not cover dental health in any detail. Professor Stephen Porter of the Eastman Dental Institute at the University of London

thinks 'important modifications' should be made to the current infection control procedures, and calls for more research specifically to be done on infection via dental treatment. So far there have been no proven cases of CJD developing as a result of dental treatment. However, Professor Porter says the possibility 'cannot be excluded'.

- Press release (Royal Society of Medicine)
- The government has confirmed that it has built up Britain's supplies of smallpox vaccine to guard the population against a possible germ warfare attack. The move is one of a package of measures introduced because of the increased fear of terrorism after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Although admitting to buying the additional doses of the vaccine the government refused, however, to confirm newspaper reports that £32 million had been spent on 30 million doses from a British pharmaceutical company. This amount would be sufficient to concentrate vaccination on the centres of infection.
- *The Times* 13<sup>th</sup> April
- Health minister Jacqui Smith has announced the additional Trusts that will provide digital hearing aids as part of a modernised hearing aid service. This follows government investment of £20 million in digital hearing aids during 2002–2003 and gives the details of 27 adult sites and 30 paediatric audiology sites, all of which will begin providing digital hearing aids as part of a modernised hearing service in the next 12 months.
- Press release (DoH)
- Leading test-tube clinics in the UK have defended their multimillion-pound profits, after they were warned that they must start paying towards the annual £60 million NHS bill for IVF twins and triplets. The clinics say that they charge realistic sums to meet public demand and reject the implication from Ruth Deech, former chairwoman of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, that their methods are reckless. The IVF doctors see Ms Deech's comments as an attack on a private sector industry that is meeting huge demand from desperate couples who feel let down by the NHS.
- *The Times* 13<sup>th</sup> April
- The *British Medical Journal*, with the help of its doctor readership, has put together a list of 174 conditions which it feels could be reclassified as 'non-diseases'. These they feel are best described as 'a human process or problem that some have defined as a medical condition but where people may have better outcomes if the problem or process was not defined in that way. Ageing came at the top of the list, followed by work, boredom and bags under

the eyes. A significant minority (13%) also wanted chronic fatigue syndrome/ME on the list. The *BMJ* makes it clear, however, that it is not suggesting that people with 'non-diseases' do not need help, and admits their suffering 'may be much greater than those with widely recognised diseases'.

Seven per cent of those taking part in the *BMJ* survey think Gulf War syndrome should be on the non-disease list. However, a study of 14,000 servicemen, carried out by the University of Manchester, concluded that Gulf War veterans are more likely to become ill and suffer more severe symptoms than other servicemen and women. The findings have been forwarded to the Ministry of Defence as the veterans have demanded a public inquiry into the health effects of serving in the Gulf War.

- *Guardian* 10<sup>th</sup> April, BBC Online

- Babies who put on too much weight during the first four months of their lives could face a lifetime of obesity, according to the largest-ever study into infant weight gain. The results of the US study has so concerned British experts that a similar project is to be launched in the UK. 'I am sure GPs are not aware of this at all: the emphasis is on looking for children who are not growing enough,' said Dr Mary Rudolph from the Leeds Community NHS Trust. Their recent study into childhood obesity found that one in three 11-year-old girls was overweight and one in ten was clinically obese. Consultant paediatrician Dr Penny Gibson, an adviser on childhood obesity, said, 'These findings are very important but only as a way of helping us target who is more likely to become obese and why, but at the moment no one is recommending putting babies on a diet.'

- *Observer* 7<sup>th</sup> April

- A pioneering form of heart surgery has had an encouraging trial at the Bristol Royal Infirmary. The so-called 'beating heart surgery' involves doctors carrying out coronary artery bypass grafts while the heart is still beating. It showed, for the first time, that the technique reduces the risk of chest infections by 12%, irregular fast heart beats by 25%, the need for red-blood transfusion by 33%, and the need for patients to stay in hospital for more than one week by 13%. Professor Gianni Angelini, who carried out the research, estimated 50% of bypass operations could be carried out using the beating heart technique – meaning a saving of up to £30 million for the NHS.

- BBC Online

- A medical investigation discovered that 80% of herbal creams used by patients of Birmingham Children's Hos-

pital contained powerful steroids never normally prescribed to children. Doctors said that the drugs could lead to irreversible thinning of the skin as well as affecting the child's growth and immune system. No warnings were found on the packets, which were available over-the-counter and by mail order. The discovery has prompted calls for tighter regulation of alternative medicines, which do not have to undergo the same stringent tests and licensing as conventional medicines. 'We don't have much control over herbal medicines,' said the Medicines Control Agency. 'We are calling for greater powers to regulate what is allowed to be sold.'

- *The Times* 20<sup>th</sup> April

- A survey of 14,000 secondary school across England, Scotland and Wales is the latest in a series of studies indicating that young people are drinking worrying amounts of alcohol. The report, carried out by Communities that Care, for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, shows that binge drinking is a significant problem among teenagers. Up to a quarter of thirteen and fourteen-year-olds admitted to having 'downed' at least five alcoholic drinks in a single session; the figure rose to half of all fifteen and sixteen-year-olds. The authors say such widespread misuse of alcohol amongst under-age drinkers 'cannot safely be ignored by parents or policy makers'. They add that drinking amongst young teenagers is linked to anti-social behaviour and use of other drugs.

- BBC Online

- The government ordered the immediate removal from sale last month of nearly fifty leading brands of insect killer, fearing that they may cause cancer and nervous disorders. The sprays or strips include fly, moth, wasp and cockroach killers that contain the chemical dichlorvos, also known as DDVP. To sell, advertise or supply the products is now illegal. Ministers acted after experts on the Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) said they could not rule out a risk of skin, liver and breast cancer from dichlorvos. Environmental campaigners are concerned that it has taken more than a decade for the government to act; DDVP was classified as a possible carcinogen in the early 1990s. Sandra Bell, spokeswoman for Friends of the Earth, said, 'This decision must cast doubt on the safety of scores of other household products'.

- *The Times* 20<sup>th</sup> April

- Doctors in Frenchay Hospital in Bristol have developed an experimental treatment which, they suspect, has regenerated the brains of five patients with Parkinson's disease. The treatment involves putting a drug called GDNF into a mechanical pump, two of which feed it to

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the most damaged parts of the brain. Nik Patel, consultant neurosurgeon at the hospital, said that although the new treatment had worked well on five people it was too few to know for sure whether it is an effective therapy.

- BBC Online

– Women are to continue getting emergency contracep-

tion over-the-counter from pharmacists. The ruling found against the challenge from the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child and upheld the government's current position. This means that the supply and use of all forms of contraception, including emergency contraception, will continue unchanged.

- Press release (DoH)