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October 2002

Health in the news

This has been a particularly quiet month in the UK for health stories. Usually there is at least one which grabs the headlines for several days, but not this month.

British scientists are keeping at the forefront of research with the news of a contract from the Medical Research Council to set up a stem cell bank in the UK (see 'Stem cell bank to be UK-based'). It seems ironic, therefore, that after all the excitement over the birth of Dolly the sheep the company who pioneered the work has been unable to find a buyer (see 'The downside of stem cell research').

Advertisers know that children are easily influenced. The chairman of the International Obesity Task Force has called for curbs on the advertising of food for children, as obesity is said to be set to overtake smoking as Britain's top preventable killer (see 'Food, not so glorious, food').

If you spend time in a large UK hospital these days you need not fret about missing your favourite soap opera. A switched-on company saw a niche in the market and is installing bedside units from which are run terrestrial and subscription TV and a telephone (see 'Plugged-in patients').

Dentistry in Britain has come in for criticism in a report from the Audit Commission. For generations we have been told it is vital to have a six-monthly check-up the experts now say every two to three years is sufficient (see 'Have teeth – must travel').

Nurses from overseas may find it easy to get jobs, but registering to enable them to do them is another matter (see 'The red tape of nurses from overseas'). And when they get here they will find that the GPs are pretty miserable, due to overwork and having to protect themselves from violent patients (see 'GP shortage "critical"').

Stem cell bank to be UK-based

As reported in last month's *Health Insight* Europe's first stem cell bank could be up and running within a year. The National Institute for Biological Standards and Control (NIBSC) has been awarded a £2.6 million contract by the Medical Research Council (MRC) to set up the bank. The NIBSC is a government-funded body charged with assuring the quality of biological materials such as vaccines and blood products. The aim of the bank is to provide for the huge amount of research needed for a better understanding of stem cells. The bank will hold cell lines, derived from stem cells, which survive indefinitely and continue to multiply and reproduce. It will hold new and existing adult, fetal and embryonic stem cell lines. A steering committee made up of scientists and bio-ethicists will develop a code of practice and regulate the running of the bank. Professor Sir George Radda, chief executive of the MRC, said, 'Stem cell research holds real promise for the treatment of many life-threatening diseases and conditions and the bank will allow researchers to explore this enormous potential in a controlled environment.' Professor Julia Goodfellow, chief executive of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, which will fund the bank along with the MRC, said, 'The bank will be a tremendous boon for keeping UK science at the very forefront of this important area of research.'

Some critics, however, fear that the existence of the stem cell bank could mean couples undergoing IVF treatment could be put under pressure to donate spare embryos. Anti-abortion campaigners are also against the bank, arguing equally effective treatments could be developed without using embryos. A spokesman for the ProLife Alliance said, 'This bank will be harvesting human stem cells from the fetus and the embryo, and these can only be obtained through the deliberate destruction of human life.' Parliament has agreed that embryos up to the age of fourteen days could be used to get embryonic stem cells.

• *New Scientist* 21st September, BBC Online



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The downside of stem cell research

The creators of Dolly the cloned sheep have announced they are to close down their British research programme into stem cells after failing to find a buyer for the business. PPL Therapeutics, founded to develop medicinal proteins in the milk of animals with altered genes, said it was still hoping to sell its US operation and organ replacement unit. The company's chief executive, Geoff Cook, said that the UK operation, which started less than two years ago, had insufficient intellectual property to make a sale. 'The programme is too young,' he said, 'it has not achieved enough.' Dolly the sheep is said to have caused some concern recently as she is said to be ageing more rapidly than would normally be expected.

– At a conference held in London last month, organised by the BioIndustry Association, a report claimed that far from speeding up the discovery of drugs, the sequencing of the human genome has actually slowed it down. 'We are drowning in data', said one of the report's authors. 'In the long run, perhaps a decade from now, we will see benefits of the genome, but at present the industry is still wrestling with how best to use the information.'

• *New Scientist* 21st September, *Guardian* 17th September

Food, not so glorious, food

Three-quarters of the UK population could be overweight within the next ten to fifteen years and obesity will overtake smoking as Britain's top preventable killer, said experts at a summit held in Copenhagen. The UK government has set up a strategy that includes giving school-children a piece of fruit a day, improving school meals and encouraging young people to exercise. But the former government advisor Professor Philip Janes, now chairman of the International Obesity Task Force, told the conference that not enough was being done to tackle the problem. He spoke about the 'huge vested interests' in the fast food and soft drink industries and warned of an 'epidemic of childhood obesity'. Professor Janes painted a future picture of clinics for diabetic children, major problems of blindness and overstretched kidney units. He said the UK government should follow the example of Finland, where there are strict regulations about the types of food that children can bring into school, and called for curbs on the advertising of food to children. Responding, Dr Roger Boyle, national director for heart disease at the

Department of Health, said that the government had not under-estimated the problem, and that many initiatives were already underway to encourage healthy eating and exercise. Obesity already costs the economy £2 billion a year, and kills 30,000 people a year prematurely, according to the National Audit Office.

– A survey by the Food and Mood Project, which is backed by the mental health charity Mind, has found that eating the right foods can improve mental health. Cutting down on food 'stressors', such as sugar, caffeine, alcohol and chocolate and increasing 'supporters', such as water, vegetables, fruit and oil-rich fish was found to be beneficial by eighty-eight per cent of those surveyed.

• *The Guardian* 13th September, BBC Online

Plugged-in patients

An emerging partnership is combining private money with new technology to enhance the lives of patients staying in NHS hospitals. At the heart of the initiative is Patientline, a stock market-listed firm set up in 1994, to take advantage of the government's commitment to provide NHS hospital patients with bedside entertainment and electronic medical records. Legislators have stipulated that all hospitals should offer a bedside TV and telephone service by the end of 2003, and electronic patient records at the point of treatment by 2005. The investment required to meet these targets is beyond the means of most local hospital trusts, so Patientline installs bedside units without charge in return for an exclusive fifteen-year contract. Although a small amount of TV is offered without charge the company makes their money from patients choosing to watch terrestrial channels throughout the day, telephoning relatives or watching subscription channels. The company expects to see a return on its investment after five to seven years.

• *The Guardian* 17th September

Latest NHS investments

Health minister Jacqui Smith has announced an extra £10 million to support a national programme of improvements to children's intensive care services. Areas of investment include the provision of an additional 100 beds to cope with the seasonal demand over the winter months, and increased training for doctors and nurses in paediatric intensive care.

An investment of £68 million will be made available over two years to expand day case surgery. Health minister John Hutton's announcement means that around 120,000 more NHS operations a year could be undertaken in day surgery units, as recommended by the Audit Com-

mission. The minister also published new operational guidance to improve day surgery rates. The guide is intended to help Trusts reduce waiting times, implement booking systems and introduce more choice. It suggests seventeen new procedures proposed by the British Association of Day Surgery, which are suitable for day surgery in some cases. These include breast cancer operations, perforated ear drum repairs, keyhole surgery on knee cartilage or shoulder joints and keyhole repair of abdominal hernias.

John Hutton also published new figures showing that the number of patients in England waiting more than twelve months for inpatient treatment dropped by 1,600 in August and is 26,400 less than a year ago. The figures also show that ninety-five per cent of cancer patients were seen within two weeks when the referral from their GP was received within twenty-four hours. As a result, one hundred per cent of patients subsequently diagnosed with children's cancer and ninety-nine per cent diagnosed with acute leukaemia received their first definitive treatment within a month.

• Press releases (DoH)

Have teeth – must travel

Four out of ten dentists in England and Wales will not accept new NHS patients, according to a report from the Audit Commission. 'Dentistry – primary dental care services in England and Wales' criticises poor access to services in some areas, failure of the existing remuneration system and inappropriate dental care. The report says that the NHS spends at least £150 million each year in England on unnecessary check-ups and treatments (such as scaling and polishing), and at least £8 million in Wales. While people can usually access emergency dental care through NHS Direct, continuing care for adults and children is far harder to find. In some areas, no dentists will accept adult NHS patients onto their lists.

The Audit Commission's report says the problems are rooted in the system rather than with the dentists themselves, who feel they are overworked and underpaid. Some have consequently moved into private practice, sometimes leaving communities with no NHS dental provision. On average, dentists estimate fifteen per cent of their patients are private, but in the Southeast that figure can be as high as fifty per cent. The report warns that the system, under which dentists are paid per item of treatment provided, means there is a 'perverse incentive' for unnecessary or cosmetic work. The commission also says the check-up system, which requires people to come in every six months, also needs to be reformed. Experts say because dental health has improved, in most cases a check-up every two to three years for adults, and one to two years for children, is enough

to pick up dental health problems.

• *Health Service Journal* 19th September, BBC Online

The red tape of nurses from overseas

Much needed overseas nurses are having real problems cutting through the red tape of registration in the UK. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has a backlog of 6,800 foreign nurses waiting to be registered. In the twelve months to March this year the NMC reported record applications from overseas nurses and midwives. The total from outside the EU rose by forty-three per cent to 41,656, with half coming from the Philippines and India. With the media highlighting individual cases of nurses waiting for months for registration, the council has begun a review of systems for registering nurses from overseas more quickly, without reducing the rigour of verification or jeopardising patient safety.

Adding to the problem are reports of overseas nurses being exploited by commercial recruitment agencies, who are charging extortionate and dishonest agency fees. To advise them, and to help with problems with contracts or employers, the Department of Health and the health workers' union UNISON have opened a new NHS overseas nurses' advice line, to offer guidance and advice. Launching the line at a London teaching hospital, health minister John Hutton said, 'Overseas nurses are an integral part of the NHS workforce. Having made the decision to work in England, they should not be sold short or deceived by either recruitment agencies or unscrupulous employers.' The advice line will complement initiatives run by other organisations such as the Royal College of Nursing and the NHS Workforce Development Confederations.

• *The Guardian* 9th September, Press release (DoH)

GP shortage 'critical'

Doctors are warning of a deepening crisis in general practice. Hundreds of family doctors are considering retiring early because of the pressure of work. Government targets mean that many are being given 'compulsory allocations'; guidelines say surgeries are expected to offer an appointment with a GP within forty-eight hours by 2004. In some areas, the allocation has trebled in the past twelve months. While some patients are facing delays of up to seventeen days for a routine appointment, in other places patients cannot find a practice to take them on, due to lack of staff. To ease the situation the government has extended the 'Golden hello' scheme, which currently pays up to £10,000 to new doctors, to include qualified doctors

not currently working in NHS general practice who return to take up an NHS post. Speaking to medical students at a London teaching hospital, health minister John Hutton said, 'Now more than ever before, we need to be positive about the future of primary care. Yes there are difficulties. No one is pretending otherwise.'

Another worrying issue for GPs is that one in four has been abused, threatened or injured at work. A GP in Lurgan, Northern Ireland has devised self-defence tuition for new doctors, to help them deal with difficult patients. Dr Fred MacSorley said he devised the self-defence classes because there seemed to be nothing available to advise doctors on how to protect themselves and their staff. 'The message is avoidance, to recognise the signs of impending violence in people, recognise their verbal cues, body language.' By coincidence a new campaign to tackle harassment of NHS staff by patients was launched at about the same time. Guidance will be sent to all NHS employers explaining the actions to be taken to both prevent and address harassment in the NHS workplace.

- BBC Online, Press releases (DoH)

NHS may claim patient injury costs

Employers who are responsible for causing accident or injury to others could be liable for the costs of any NHS hospital treatment required by the injured person. Following recommendations from the Law Commission, the government has published a consultation document looking at extending the system of recovery of NHS costs from road traffic accidents to all personal injury claims. The extended scheme could raise £220 million a year for NHS hospitals. Health minister David Lammy said the scheme would provide incentives for companies to improve health and safety in the workplace. The proposals were welcomed by the Trades Union Congress. Its deputy general secretary Brendan Barber said, 'Making the perpetrator pay would increase the incentive for prevention.' However, the Association of British Insurers said the extra costs would simply be passed on to policyholders. A spokesman said, 'The question is whether this is the right way, particularly since the cost will inevitably land on the policyholder who is already paying for the NHS through taxes.'

- Press release (DoH), BBC Online

Scotland aims to change its unhealthy image

Scotland's first minister Jack McConnell said recently that he was embarrassed at his country's reputation as the sick

man of Europe. In a newspaper interview he indicated that public health, particularly Scotland's unhealthy diet, was to be his own personal crusade. The health improvement agenda will dominate a large part of a white paper from the Scottish Executive, due to be published next year. It will highlight four key areas, which it is claimed, will have the biggest and quickest impact on the population's health. The areas are the start of life (from pre-birth to early childhood), children making the transition from primary to secondary school, workplace health, and community development, including tackling health inequalities. The priorities were all chosen after much debate, following publication of internal documents by Professor Phil Hanlon, director of the Public Health Institute. He stressed that other areas of public health, such as food, smoking and older people were not being ignored.

The Scottish Executive and consultant leaders have also been busy considering the framework to the consultant contract, which dealt with seniority, working times, job plans and pay progression. The framework met with some hostility, particularly among junior doctors and some English consultants, but those in Scotland look likely to accept the proposals. If so, this will be the first time that consultants in different parts of the UK would be working under distinct terms and conditions.

- *Health Service Journal* 5th, 12th September

Appointments

- Professor Sir George Alberti has been appointed as the national clinical director for emergency access. The former president of the Royal College of Physicians will advise on the implementation of the government's ten-year strategy to improve emergency services, improving patient experience and acting as a link between policy and clinical colleagues. He will also act as a troubleshooter at individual trusts facing difficulties with emergency care.

- *Health Service Journal* 12th September

- Richard Granger has been appointed Director General of NHS Information Technology. He will be responsible for implementing the NHS information and technology programme – one of the world's largest IT developments. The programme means that patients will benefit from more efficient services, including the electronic transfer of test results and information between health professionals, electronic booking and electronic transfer of prescriptions.

- Press release (DoH)

In brief

- The first published guidance for UK GPs on how to deal with migraine patients has been published. An estimated eight million people in the UK suffer from regular severe headaches, which costs the UK economy more than a billion pounds every year. Experts say that many patients take too many over-the-counter painkillers, which could make their condition worse. They are urging people to visit their doctor for correct diagnosis and advice on the various treatment options available. The new guidelines will be available to all 36,000 GPs in the UK and a specially targeted 7,500.
 - BBC Online
- Most cases of food poisoning in the UK are caused by a germ carried by chickens and passed on in undercooked or poorly prepared food. Scientists at the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) have found that the *Campylobacter* bacterium can be picked up by the chickens in the slaughtering process. Even if the chicken is not infected by the bug when it enters the abattoir, they often have it at the end of processing as they come into contact with equipment or surfaces contaminated by infected birds slaughtered earlier in the day. The PHLS said the findings highlighted the need for better hygiene standards in slaughterhouses.
 - BBC Online
- England's first ever National Suicide Prevention Strategy has been launched by health minister Jacqui Smith. It leads the way on meeting the government's target of reducing the number of suicides by at least a fifth by 2010. As announced in the NHS Plan, the government is to invest £329 million over the next three years to improve community services. This will include the development of more crisis resolutions teams, assertive outreach services and early intervention teams.
 - Press release (DoH)
- Two British psychologists are at the centre of a row over the safety of ecstasy, claiming the drug may not be dangerous in the long term. University of Liverpool scientists Dr John Cole and Harry Sumnall, working with an American psychologist, have criticised animal and human studies that say the drug causes long-term brain damage and mental problems. Dr Cole and his colleagues say the changes in the brain involved the degeneration of nerve fibres, which can be regrown, and not the cell bodies themselves. Their comments have provoked outrage from anti-drugs charities groups and parents of children who have died from taking ecstasy.
 - BBC Online
- One in fifty gay men attending a sexual health clinic has contracted HIV in the previous year, according to new figures from the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS). Experts used a new test to identify the rate of new infections. Dr John Parry of the PHLS Central Public Health Laboratory, said, 'This is a worrying finding because it confirms what we have feared, that twenty years into the HIV epidemic, transmission of this incurable but preventable infection is continuing at a steady rate in gay men.' However, Will Nutland, from the Terence Higgins Trust, stressed that the PHLS study had identified a two per cent risk amongst gay men attending sexual health clinics, not gay men in general.
 - BBC Online
- The government's policy of putting machines to treat heart attack patients in public places is unlikely to save many lives research suggests. The Department of Health is committed to providing 700 public access defibrillators in seventy-two sites across England and Wales, including airports and shopping centres. But a study carried out by doctors at Glasgow University suggests that the policy is unlikely to have much effect. The researchers used records of 15,189 heart attacks that took place outside a hospital between 1991 and 1998 to estimate how many lives public access defibrillators would have saved. Nearly eight out of ten of the heart attacks took place at sites – such as in the home – where people would not have been able to access a defibrillator. Just eighteen per cent occurred in suitable sites, such as shops, places of business or sport centres, while another three per cent occurred in possible suitable sites, such as buses and multi-storey car parks. The authors predict that locating public access defibrillators only in suitable places would increase the survival rate from five per cent to just over six per cent.
 - BBC Online
- New treatments for cancer, coronary heart disease, psoriasis and asthma are being considered for referral to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). Stakeholders, including professional and patient groups and relevant manufacturers, were asked to comment on the proposals by the end of September. If the proposed topics are confirmed they will form part of an eighth wave of appraisals and clinical guidelines to be referred to NICE later this year.
 - Press release (DoH)
- Patients could soon be tested for brittle bone disease at their local pharmacy. It follows a successful pilot trial to test people over the age of sixty at a pharmacy in north-east London. A total of 179 people were screened for the

condition over the past year. Of these forty-six were found to be at risk and thirty-six were found to have osteoporosis – they were referred to their GP for treatment. In the second stage of the scheme, the pharmacist will now also be given responsibility for prescribing medication temporarily to those with the disease. The move is part of a wider trend to give pharmacists a greater role in treating patients. Osteoporosis affects one in three women and one in twelve men over the age of fifty. Up to 14,000 people a year in the UK die from the disease with many others suffering severe disability.

- BBC Online

- Last year there were 1100 cases of *E. coli* in Britain, but fewer than twenty per cent were due to food poisoning. William Reilly, from the Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health in Glasgow, compared the lifestyles of 180 people who picked up an infection from an unknown source with 600 people who hadn't been infected. At the Society for General Microbiology's meeting in Loughborough last month, Reilly reported that contact with animals or animal faeces is the main cause of outbreaks. He believes that animals should be removed from camp sites and outdoor venues, such as the sites of music festivals, at least three weeks before people arrive.

- *New Scientist* 21st September

- The husband of Diane Pretty, who failed to win the right to be helped to die, is continuing his late wife's campaign for a change in the law. Brian Pretty delivered a petition containing around 50,000 signatures to Downing Street, along with a personal letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair, pressing for a change. Forty-three-year-old Mrs Pretty, who had motor neurone disease, died in May this year. She and her husband, backed by the Voluntary Euthanasia Society and the civil rights group Liberty, had taken their campaign all the way to the European Court of Human Rights, after being defeated in a series of UK courts. Mr Pretty risked prosecution if he defied the courts and helped his wife to die.

- BBC Online

- A study published in the *British Medical Journal* last month shows that fewer people than once feared may

be incubating vCJD in Britain. The prediction is based on tests on tonsil and appendix tissue taken out in the 1990s. Out of thousands of samples taken from apparently healthy patients only one showed abnormal prion protein – thought to be the cause of vCJD. Chief Medical Officer, Sir Liam Donaldson stressed the uncertainties of the implications of this finding. He announced plans to set up a new archive of tonsils for more research to support a better estimate of the prevalence of the disease. The studies reported in the *BMJ* are continuing and another study on tonsils is ongoing at the MRC Prion Unit in London.

- Press release (DoH), BBC Online

- Chronic fatigue syndrome (ME) may be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, according to a study at Hammersmith Hospital in London. Doctors there used state-of-the-art scanning technology to assess chemical activity in the brain. They found higher levels of two key chemicals – choline and creatine – in the brains of people with the condition. Dr Basant Puri, who led the study, said fatty acid supplements could help to restore the chemical imbalance in the brain and alleviate the symptoms. The charity Action for ME said they would look at the research 'with great interest' but warned that the condition is complex and all the evidence so far suggests that there is no single cause.

- BBC Online

- Women who are given long-lasting contraceptive injections may suffer physical changes, which increase their risk of heart disease. A team of scientists from Imperial College School of Medicine in London say there is enough evidence to concern women who already had heart risks before they started taking the drug. They suggest that the drug may, if taken over a longer period, restrict the ability of the body's arteries to contract and expand. This could render the arteries more vulnerable to suffer from the clogging and hardening which can lead to heart disease. The injections are seen as a convenient alternative to taking the contraceptive pill every day, or using barrier methods such as condoms. However, this latest research suggests that the jab may not prove to be an entirely risk-free alternative for some women.

- BBC Online