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## Health in the news

Britain's worst ever outbreak of legionnaire's disease was in the news almost every day last month. Just as it seemed to be on the wane, a woman who had had hospital treatment for the disease and been discharged collapsed and died, thus re-igniting concerns (see 'Legionnaires' disease hits Britain').

A consultation paper on tackling infectious diseases, published in January, had the interesting title, 'Getting Ahead of the Curve'. Had its suggestions been implemented before the legionnaire's outbreak, things might have been dealt with somewhat differently (see 'Infectious diseases: battle lines drawn').

A lot of fuss was made at the end of last month about the government seemingly buying the wrong smallpox vaccine. All seems well now though, thanks to the wise words of the US's chief smallpox adviser (see 'UK government defends smallpox vaccine decision').

It seems that patients were more convinced than NHS managers and clinicians about the pilot schemes to have operations abroad, in order to cut waiting lists. As a huge amount of money is being spent to fund proposed day surgery operations we may not see any more people struggling onto Eurostar with their baggage (see 'Overseas treatment fails to impress' and 'Big boost for day surgery').

Unless you watch motor racing you may not be seeing tobacco advertising after the end of 2002. The huge amount of money spent on trying to help people give up smoking seems to be bearing fruit too (see 'Tobacco advertising ban nearly there').

The strangest story of the month had to be the resignation of the chairman of the council of the Royal College of Nursing. She was accused of making a racist remark, following a slip of the tongue when she referred to absent council members as 'being like the *Ten Little Niggers*'. Unfortunately for her, not everyone reads Agatha Christie (see 'More problems at the Royal College of Nursing').

## Legionnaires' disease hits Britain

As we write the worst outbreak of legionnaires' disease in Britain continues in Barrow-in-Furness. Five people have died and there are 131 confirmed cases; nearly 330 other people have received hospital treatment in the town with suspected cases of the bug. One fifty-six-year-old woman collapsed and died at home after being discharged from hospital following treatment. The first case in the Cumbrian town was identified at the beginning of August. The source of the outbreak is believed to have been a council-run arts centre in the middle of the coastal town. Tests on a thirty-year-old air condition system there found traces of the *Legionella pneumophila* bacterium, which causes the disease, in the water treatment plant. Several other cases of legionnaires' disease were reported in other parts of the country. Two people in Bedfordshire were treated in hospital after contracting the disease, and there were two small outbreaks in the West Midlands: Sandwell General Hospital admitted three patients for treatment and Oldbury admitted seven people – one of them dying later from the disease. Doctors at Furness General Hospital say there is continued improvement in the condition of patients suffering from the pneumonia-like illness. They are hopeful that the disease may not have affected as many as first feared.

Legionnaires' disease is a serious disease, which can lead to respiratory and liver failure; in the most severe cases it can prove fatal. The Bacteria are inhaled but are not passed on from patient to patient. Figures from the Public Health Laboratory Service show that there are up to 200 cases of legionnaires' disease in Britain each year. Provisional figures from the Office of National Statistics show there were fourteen deaths from the disease in 2001.

• *Guardian* 28<sup>th</sup> August, *The Times* 3<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> August, BBC Online



Prepared on behalf of The British Council

Written by Penny Lang  
Page Layout by Elizabeth Hyde.  
FSG Communications Ltd,  
Vine House,  
Fair Green, Reach, CB5 0JD, UK.  
Fax: +44 1638 743998  
E-mail: [info@fsg.co.uk](mailto:info@fsg.co.uk)  
Web: [www.fsg.co.uk](http://www.fsg.co.uk)

## Infectious diseases: battle lines drawn

While the media is busy frightening the public over legionnaires' disease the government is quietly making new plans to tackle infectious diseases generally.

Professor Sir Liam Donaldson's consultation paper 'Getting Ahead of the Curve', published in January, is designed to tidy up the fragmented system currently protecting the public. From next April, the Health Protection Agency (HPA) will take on many of the responsibilities of the Public Health Laboratory Service, which the report suggests should be disbanded – as well as those of the National Radiological Protection Board, the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research, and the National Focus for Chemical Incidents. According to Professor Donaldson's paper the HPA will 'act as a source of national expertise' and 'provide key services at national, regional and local level in a range of specified areas of health protection'. It will 'take overall responsibility for the surveillance of infectious diseases, for commissioning and coordinating specialist and reference microbiology laboratories and play a key role in the provision of a service for the prevention and control of infectious disease [and] chemical and radiation hazards in the population'. While the HPA will track the spread of diseases such as legionnaires', it will also oversee cases such as Ebola fever, fallout from biological terrorist attacks (such as anthrax), CJD, and HIV/AIDS.

While few question the need for reform, experts in health protection are somewhat concerned at the speed at which all this is taking place. The Department of Health says that with the consultation period not yet complete it does not want to get drawn into a premature debate. However, Sir William Stewart – chair of the Microbiology Research Authority – has already been announced as the HPA shadow chair, and he is confident in that. 'I know there will be a smooth transfer of responsibilities come April next year,' he said.

• *Health Service Journal* 15<sup>th</sup> August

## UK government defends smallpox vaccine decision

As reported in last month's *Health Insight* it was alleged that the UK government had bought the wrong vaccine to protect the country from the threat of a smallpox attack by terrorists. Millions of doses of a smallpox vaccine, based on what is known as the Lister strain of the disease, were bought at a cost of £32 million. The New York City Board of Health, however, had developed a different strain of the vaccine. Stephen Prior, of the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies in the US, claimed that the British vaccine was inferior. He looked at which vaccines were used where, and with what success, during the eradication programmes

of the 1960s and 1970s. However, D A Henderson of Johns Hopkins University, who led the smallpox eradication drive and is the US's chief smallpox adviser, rejects Stephen Prior's claims, saying that the Lister strain was used successfully to eliminate the virus in countries where smallpox was still circulating. 'The Lister strain, so far as we could tell, was fully as protective as the New York City Board of Health strain,' he said. The main concern now this argument has been settled seems to be whether Britain will have enough vaccine to contain an outbreak, as the government won't disclose how many doses it has ordered.

• *New Scientist* 10<sup>th</sup> August, BBC Online

## MRC proposes creation of stem cell bank

Thousands of human embryos could be collected in the world's first cell bank to aid government scientific research. Plans for the bank, which will hold stem cells from both embryos and adults, have been agreed in principle by the Medical Research Council, which oversees funding for government health-related scientific research projects, but are still awaiting ministerial approval. The MRC will present its proposals at its conference this month.

Under the plans, couples that have undergone fertility treatment will be asked to donate leftover embryos, from which stem cells can be taken. At present embryos that are not used are discarded. British law allows scientists to conduct research on embryos up to 14 days old. The bank would be operated without any vested commercial interest; a number of charities are thought to have expressed an interest. A panel, chaired by Chief Medical Officer Professor Sir Liam Donaldson, recommended the creation of the bank in its report, 'Stem Cell Research – Medical Progress with Responsibility', published in August 2000.

• *The Guardian* 28<sup>th</sup> August

## Overseas treatment fails to impress

Managers and clinicians involved in the overseas treatment pilots were far less happy with the schemes than the patients who used them, according to a report published by the Department of Health. The report studied the treatment of NHS patients earlier this year in French and German hospitals. The pilot schemes, run by three UK health authorities, were originally designed to treat 300 patients, but just 190 were actually treated: 153 hip or

knee patients and thirty-seven cataract patients. Four out of five patients were 'very satisfied' with their overseas care. There were few medical complications and the clinical standards were deemed to be high by those who took part. But interviews with the managers and clinicians involved found the £1.1 million pilots funded by the Department of Health were 'not very successful' in either creating capacity or having a significant impact on waiting lists and waiting times. 'There was a strong view that resources should have been invested locally and that the projects were not cost effective,' the report said. It blamed poor 'buy in' from local NHS GPs and consultants, lack of funding and a 'conservative approach' when deciding which patients would be suitable for treatment.

• *Health Service Journal* 15<sup>th</sup> August

## More problems at the Royal College of Nursing

The chairman of the council of the Royal College of Nursing, Pat Bottrill, resigned recently in a most bizarre fashion. While chairing a meeting of the council several members failed to return after a coffee break. Commenting on their absence Mrs Bottrill used the phrase 'ten little niggers', after the Agatha Christie novel in which a group of people are picked off one by one. This was deemed to be racially unacceptable by some members of the council. What was equally surprising was that the reason for Mrs Bottrill's resignation was shrouded in secrecy to members of the RCN, until a regional evening paper ran the story. It has angered many nurses who are unhappy with the culture of secrecy that has grown up at the college. Peggy Pryer, an RCN member for almost thirty years, said, 'We are in such a state and it is extremely saddening. It is impossible to find anything out. We have asked lots of questions but we aren't being told anything.' A spokesman for the RCN admitted that the union was going through some uncomfortable changes, but denied that growing dissent was being ignored or suppressed.

At the centre of the storm is Beverley Malone, an American academic appointed to revolutionise the union last year. Her popularity has been eroded by members opposed to the appointment of a non-NHS outsider, and a succession of embarrassments. A new website, set up by nurses for each other, shows how highly passions are running. 'Unless the council and the rest of the administration get their heads out of the sand and become transparent in their dealings, any shred of credibility left will go out of the window,' one nurse wrote.

• *The Times* 17<sup>th</sup> August

## Reform of the junior doctor grade

Plans for the biggest reform and modernisation of the junior doctors grade, which will give young doctors in training better career opportunities, were launched by the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Liam Donaldson. The report, 'Unfinished Business', says its main aim is to introduce structured training for doctors at Senior House Officers (SHO) grade through closely managed training programmes. This will ensure that as many doctors who wish to enter higher specialist or GP training can do so. Professor Sir Graeme Catto, President of the GMC, and a member of the working group which prepared the report, said, 'We now look forward to working with the health departments across the UK to reflect the principles of the report in future arrangements for new doctors.'

There are 19,000 SHOs in the UK – nearly half of all doctors in training. At about this time of the year some 4,700 new doctors, who have just finished medical school, start work in hospitals. A third of them will be working too many hours, according to the British Medical Association. This is in spite of rotas being limited to fifty-six hours a week since August 2001. Dr Trevor Pickersgill, the junior doctors' leader said, 'Although working hours are slowly coming down, the pace of hospital life has intensified, with more acutely ill patients being treated and shorter stays in hospital.'

• Press release (DoH), BBC Online

## Tobacco advertising ban nearly there

A bill outlawing advertisements in magazines, newspapers, on the internet and on billboards is currently going through parliament. If passed by MPs, the bill will come into effect 'by the end of 2002'. The Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill won government backing earlier this year. It has completed all stages in the House of Lords and is expected to be given final approval by MPs when they return from their summer recess.

Under the plans, tobacco companies will also be stopped from sponsoring sporting events. However, as expected Formula 1 racing and other 'global sporting events' will be given until 2006 to find alternative sources of funding. Public Health Minister, Hazel Blears, said, 'A ban on tobacco advertising and promotion is an effective measure we can take to stop young people from starting to smoke...Research shows that an advertising ban could eventually save up to 3,000 lives a year.'

– Over 120,000 smokers kicked the habit in the last year after receiving help from NHS smoking cessation services in the last year. The government spent over £53 million on the services up to March 2002. In 2002/2003 a further £20 million will be invested, plus a substantial amount for smoking cessation aids available on NHS prescription.

• Press release (DoH), BBC Online

## Big boost for day surgery

Up to 120,000 more operations could become day cases under government plans to extend the range of day surgery. Health Minister, John Hutton, promised an extra £68 million over two years to fund the proposals; the policy is a key part of the government's campaign to reduce waiting times for operations to just six months by 2005. Seventeen categories of surgery will include breast cancer operations, hernia repairs, and orthopaedic procedures on the knee and shoulder. Patient groups have responded to the news with caution. Mike Stone, of the Patients' Association, said, 'We have to welcome it, because patients don't want to spend more time than they have to in hospital. But we have to make sure that patients are fit to be discharged and that there are systems available at home to look after them if they suffer any after-effects.'

Mr Hutton also announced ten fast-track diagnosis and treatment centres to provide quick ophthalmology, orthopaedics and general surgery care. The centres will be able to treat an extra 25,000 cases a year. Money has also been made available to fund one-stop primary care centres, housing GPs, pharmacists, dentists, opticians, health visitors and social services staff.

• *The Times* 17<sup>th</sup> August, BBC Online

## Chickenpox vaccine launched

The first vaccine against chickenpox has been launched in the UK. The vaccine, manufactured by GlaxoSmithKline, could provide an answer to concerns over the risks chickenpox (varicella) poses to adults. Each year about twenty adults die from varicella, which is a highly infectious viral disease. It can also cause miscarriage or birth defects in the unborn child. The rise in adult cases of chickenpox has led to calls for healthcare workers to be vaccinated. Hospital staff who come into contact with the virus are not allowed to work with certain patients, putting pressure on the NHS. The Department of Health says it will be considering how the vaccine can be most effectively used in the NHS 'in due course'.

– The Committee on Safety of Medicines advised that Urabemum vaccine is associated with an unacceptable risk of aseptic meningitis. The Medicines Control Agency consequently contacted importers notifying them that the vaccine was not to be imported.

• BBC Online, Scottish Health News, Press release (DoH)

## Foundation status: the pros and cons

Hospitals attaining the glorious three stars in the NHS performance management system face the possibility of applying to become a foundation trust. In London, however, the details of how foundation status will actually work is causing a few arguments among MPs. University College London Hospitals trust is in the constituency of MP Frank Dobson. He is concerned about management and clinicians at the trust being distracted from their main job of treating patients to hiring the services of accountants and lawyers to prepare their application for foundation status. MPs in neighbouring areas are also concerned about the knock-on effects for other primary and tertiary health services in their districts. Some think that it will lead to a two-tier health service with hospitals such as UCLH occupying the top tier and smaller hospitals getting further and further down the star table due to lack of funding.

• *Health Service Journal* 22<sup>nd</sup> August

## National Blood Services to improve

Fresh frozen plasma for newborn babies and young children born after 1<sup>st</sup> January 1996 will be obtained from the United States in future, as an additional precaution against the theoretical risk of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) transmission. This fresh frozen plasma will have a further treatment to reduce the risk of blood-borne viruses. It is thought that children born after 1995 will have escaped coming in contact with vCJD in the food chain. The Department of Health said the move was designed to stop them becoming exposed to vCJD, which could potentially be carried in British blood products. The precaution is in addition to steps that have already been taken to improve blood safety. These include the removal of white blood cells, which evidence suggests may carry the greatest risk of transmitting vCJD, and the importation of plasma from the US for the production of blood products.

• Press release (DoH)

## Disgraced doctors

- Janardan Dhasmana, one of the surgeons at the centre of the Bristol baby deaths scandal, has lost his tribunal claim for unfair dismissal and breach of trust. He was dismissed by the United Bristol Healthcare trust after being found guilty of serious professional misconduct by the General Medical Council, which banned him from operating on children for three years and extended the ban for a further year. The two other doctors involved, James Wisheart and John Roylance, were struck off.
- The Chief Medical Officer, Professor Sir Liam Donaldson is examining how disgraced gynaecologist Richard Neale came to be given a job in the NHS months after he was struck off for botching operations. In July 2000, Mr Neale was struck off the general medical register after he was found guilty of thirty-five out of thirty-six charges. A month later, he was given a post in the clinical audit department of Wythenshawe Hospital, part of South Manchester University Hospitals trust. He held the job – which had no clinical responsibilities or patient contact – for nine months. A Department of Health spokesperson said, ‘We are appalled to hear that Richard Neale has been re-employed in the NHS.’
- A family doctor who drugged and sexually abused young men over a period of ten years faces prison after admitting thirty-one offences of indecent assault, administering drugs, and taking and possessing indecent photographs. Timothy Healy, fifty-six, was suspended by the General Medical Council in June last year, after thirty years as a GP. Now he is likely to be struck off. At Southwark Crown Court in early August he was remanded for sentence until late September.
- A General Medical Council professional conduct committee hearing, held at the end of August, heard how a GP from Blackheath, London allegedly agreed to arrange a kidney transplant using a live donor. Dr Bhagat Singh Makkar was accused of breaking GMC guidelines and laws banning trading in live organs.
- *Health Service Journal* 8<sup>th</sup> August, BBC Online, *The Times* 3<sup>rd</sup> August

## In brief

- More and more people are being diagnosed with sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Statistics from the Public Health Laboratory Service show chlamydia is the most common STI. A total of 67,403 cases were diagnosed in clinics across England last year, up ten per cent on the previous twelve months. Gonorrhoea was up by eight per cent, with a total of 22,116 cases identified, and there was a doubling of people diagnosed with syphilis – from 322 in 2000 to 697 last year. As the

statistics were published the Department of Health published details of ten locations to take forward the first phase of a national chlamydia screening programme.

- BBC Online, Press release (DoH)
- A thirty-year-old cancer patient, who has had her ovaries removed, is taking her former boyfriend to court to stop him having the eleven embryos they created together being destroyed. Natallie Evans was going to have the embryos implanted once she was well enough but Howard Johnston recently asked the Bath Assisted Conception Clinic to remove the frozen embryos from storage, which would destroy them. Mr Johnston had signed a consent form saying that his sperm and any resulting embryos could be stored for ten years. There was no clause in the agreement to cover the couple parting.
- *The Times* 3<sup>rd</sup> August
- Much of the fruit and vegetables in UK supermarkets contains potentially harmful pesticide residues, according to a study by Friends of the Earth. The survey used information from the Pesticides Safety Directorate from 1998 to 2000 and looked at nine supermarket chains. The worst supermarket showed sixty per cent of its fruit and vegetables contained the residues. Sandra Bell, pesticide campaigner at Friends of the Earth, said, ‘There is too much hype from supermarkets about their plans to cut pesticide use, and not enough action.’ Responding, Ian Brown, chairman of the government’s pesticides committee said, ‘The most important point is that residues remain within the maximum level. So far we have no cause for concern, because the levels are so low.’
- BBC Online
- Hundreds more kidney patients are likely to be provided with dialysis machines so they can carry out their own treatment at home, under proposals from a government watchdog. The recommendation, if adopted by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (Nice) this year, would mean a five-fold increase in the number of patients conducting their own dialysis. At present only about one in fifty do so, although this varies widely across England and Wales. The cost of equipment and training patients to treat themselves would probably be outweighed by the annual saving, which is likely to be over £5,500 a year per patient.
- *The Guardian* 28<sup>th</sup> August
- The majority of GPs favour charging patients who fail to turn up for appointments, according to a survey which questioned 577 GP practices across the UK. In the UK

more than fifteen million appointments are thought to be missed, as well as more than four million practice nurse appointments. The survey found that fifty-eight per cent of GPs questioned said they would support the idea of charging patients for missed appointments. The Doctor–Patient Partnership launched its ‘Keep it or Cancel it’ campaign recently. It is being backed by the Department of Health who have been reported as considering introducing non-attendance fines as one way of cutting missed appointments.

- BBC Online

- The way cancer spreads round the body has become clearer following a discovery by scientists at the Beatson Institute in Glasgow. Researchers have discovered that a key protein molecule – called Src – helps to loosen the structure of tissues surrounding a tumour, opening the way for cancer cells to spread around the body. Src was the first ever molecule to be implicated in the development of cancer, in particular bowel cancer. However, until now nobody knew exactly what it did. Lead researcher Professor Margaret Frame said, ‘Improving our understanding of how cancer spreads should help in the development of drugs to block the process. If we could confine cancer cells to the original tumour it would give surgery a much greater chance of success and reduce the risk of the disease reappearing in other parts of the body.’ The full research is published in the journal *Nature Cell Biology*.

- BBC Online

- Health Secretary Alan Milburn has met some of the first overseas doctors to come to work in the NHS as part of the government’s overseas clinical teams initiative to help reduce waiting times. A pilot scheme, led by a number of London hospital trusts, will provide general surgery to patients in the NorthWest Thames Sector. Consultants from Italy, Belgium and Germany are taking part in the programme, which also offers overseas and local teams an opportunity to exchange clinical and academic expertise and best practice. Schemes in Hillingdon, London and South Tyneside are also underway with overseas clinicians working with trust staff to boost the number of orthopaedic assessments and operations.

- Press release (DoH)

- The number of organs available for transplant is falling, while the numbers waiting continue to rise. Figures from UK Transplant, which runs the donor system, show the number of transplants fell by thirteen per cent in the six months to July, compared with the same period in 2001. Professor Andrew Bradley, director of transplantation

at Addenbrooke’s Hospital, Cambridge, and a former president of the British Transplant Society, said some doctors were refusing to put patients’ names on lists, because there was little hope of them receiving an organ. He described the current situation as ‘a complete disaster’. The Department of Health said fewer deaths from accidents and illness meant there were fewer potential donors. Relatives not being asked to give their consent and coroners refusing to allow donation is thought to add to the problem. Sue Sutherland, chief executive of UK Transplant, says it was working hard to boost the number of donors. An estimated nine and a half million people are currently on the organ donor register. The government has pledged to increase that number to sixteen million by 2010.

- BBC Online

- Britain’s hospitals could be overwhelmed by the level of flooding likely to be caused by global warming, a government report has warned. The Expert Group on Climate Change and Health in the UK was set up by the Department of Health. Its report, ‘Health Effects of Climate Change in the UK’ predicts that the rising temperature would lead to 2,000 extra heat-related deaths and 10,000 food poisoning cases a year. That would be offset by 20,000 fewer cold-related deaths each winter. The authors of the report think the NHS would be able to cope with this; it is the increased threat of a flood, such as the one that devastated East Anglia in 1953, which would pose a problem. ‘Should such an event occur, local NHS resources would be likely to be overwhelmed’, they say.

- *The Times* 3<sup>rd</sup> August

- The government has published a strategy to tackle hepatitis C, which aims to raise the professional and public awareness of the disease and sets out proposals to improve the effectiveness of its prevention, diagnosis and treatment services. Over recent years hepatitis C has emerged as a major public health issue worldwide. In the UK there is a relatively low prevalence of infection in relation to other developed countries in Europe and elsewhere. Even so an estimated 200,000 people in England are infected with the disease without being aware they have the disease. Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Dr Pat Troop, said, ‘It is, therefore, essential that we intensify our efforts to prevent new cases and to diagnose and treat those who are already infected.’

- Press release (DoH)

- Almost half a million people are waiting for important scans at NHS hospitals, according to a report from the

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independent watchdog the Audit Commission. Huge delays in radiology services in hospitals across England and Wales are blamed on shortages in equipment and staff, and inefficient use of machines. The Department of Health says that since these figures were compiled the situation has improved, with over £100 million

being spent on new equipment. Mike Stone of the Patients' Association is sceptical, however. 'This whole area does need looking at and the question to be asked is when is it going to be looked at and when is it going to get better?' he said.

- BBC Online