

News bites

South Africa

Survey to track spread of AIDS

A survey will be conducted to determine the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the country. This is the third national HIV/AIDS, Behaviour and Health household survey, and researchers are keen to find solutions and more effective preventive measures to the pandemic. They are also keen to establish what South Africans know, believe and feel about HIV/AIDS. The survey will be undertaken by several research institutions led by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC).

Announcing the survey last month, HSRC chief executive Dr Olive Shisana said about 28 000 people from all parts of the country would be canvassed. The aim of the survey was to assess South Africans' health conditions and behaviour that put them at risk of contracting HIV, she said. It was also aimed at assessing the impact of the HIV/AIDS National Strategic Plan. Participants will have blood samples taken. Those aged 12 and older will answer questions about their health and sexual behaviour. HSRC spokesperson Ina van der Linde said participation was voluntary and all participants would remain anonymous. 'High-profile individuals in the country have given their support to this important study and agreed to promote participation in the survey. These calls for participation are aimed at South Africans of all races, young and old, able-bodied and disabled, from all backgrounds.'

'Immigrants turned away from hospitals'

The chairman of the Pretoria Red Cross has condemned the 'harsh treatment' of displaced foreigners at the Pretoria Academic Hospital. Gillian Elson said the foreigners were usually turned away if they were not accompanied by Red Cross officials. She said the Red Cross had complained to hospital management, but the situation had not changed.

'The hospital should be able to understand these people's circumstances and help where they can instead of just turning them away when they need help.' The Red Cross was apparently told to get a guarantee from the Zimbabwean embassy to pay for medical services before an ill foreigner could be treated. 'They were going to turn her away before I threatened to expose them to the media,' she said.

Jeffrey Basubi, spokesperson for the human rights organisation Our Voice, said displaced foreigners often struggled to get help at hospitals. 'Sometimes they tell them that there's no space to accommodate them. The foreigners have lost all their belongings and so can't pay for medical treatment,' he said. According to Basubi, some staff members at various clinics and hospitals were rude and unhelpful towards the foreigners even though they knew their circumstances.

Pretoria Academic Hospital spokesperson Fredah Kobo said she was not aware of any incidents of foreigners being mistreated. She said the matter would be investigated once all the relevant information had been gathered. Kobo said the hospital only treated patients who had been referred for specialist treatment. Sometimes other people would be treated, but usually when it was a serious situation, such as an accident. 'I don't think the hospital would turn people away because they are foreigners,' she said.

Minister told to focus on public health care

Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang should leave the private health care sector alone and focus on fixing the crumbling public health sector, United South African Pharmacies (USAP) charged. While the Health Department has asked the private health care sector to comment on draft amendments to the Medicines and Related Substances Act and the National Health Act, USAP was sceptical about the department's commitment to substantively consider the proposals.

'Our experience with the Department of Health over the issue of the pharmacy dispensing fee for medicines has left us cynical in the extreme,' USAP chairman Julian Solomon said. 'It is time the private health care sector put a stake in the ground and said: leave us alone and rather focus on fixing the crumbling public health care sector.' The proposed amendments had wide-ranging implications for delivery by the full range of private health care providers, including pharmacies, pharmaceutical companies, doctors, hospitals and medical aid groups, Solomon said.

'The reality is that unless the department takes account of the proposals and concerns raised by those at the coal-face

of private health care service delivery, the flood of health care professionals already leaving this country will increase, which will have a further material impact on the ability of the private sector to deliver quality health care services,' he said.

EC medicine bursaries out

The Eastern Cape Health Department has invited applications for its latest batch of bursaries to study medicine in Cuba. Since 1998, more than 100 students from the province have graduated as doctors after benefiting from the Cuban study bursaries. The department said it was offering 25 places to applicants who had difficulty gaining acceptance to South African medical universities. They would be recruited from predominantly rural areas and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Prisoners to get HIV drugs

Human rights organisations have applauded the Correctional Services Department's decision to provide prisoners with antiretroviral drugs. The department launched prison HIV/AIDS testing sites in Pretoria in late May with Correctional Services Minister Ngconde Balfour, Deputy Minister Loretta Jacobus and Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka in attendance.

Correctional services spokesman Manelisi Wolela said of the four new ARV sites Johannesburg and Pretoria had been accredited. The remaining two would be considered during the financial year. Wolela said providing antiretrovirals in prisons was aimed at minimising escapes. 'It's a mandate of the Health Department to provide help to all citizens,' he said. 'There is a high risk of escapes if we transport offenders to health facilities outside prisons.'

Wolela said there were at present 15 accredited sites. 'The one that will be unveiled now brings the number to 16,' he said. 'It's a partnership between our department and the Health Department. The Health Department has deployed three lay counsellors to the Pretoria management area ARV site. They have provided wellness programmes to 24 offenders since April.'

Capetonian helps invent 'StressEraser'

A Cape Town research psychologist has joined members of a New York research lab to come up with a new iPod-sized gadget

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to relieve stress. Called the StressEraser, it has been scientifically proven to work, says research psychologist Dr Justin Kennedy. According to StressFit.com, the StressEraser provides accurate moment-by-moment heart rate variability (HRV) feedback on how breathing, thoughts and the emotional state are influencing stress levels.

It tells you how to pace your breathing with your heart cycles to induce optimal HRV in a very short time, and gives you a relaxation point for each outbreak. It then adds up all your relaxation points so you can see if you have dosed yourself sufficiently. And it remembers your session scores over days or months so you can compare different relaxation techniques and track your progress. Clinical tests were conducted at UCT, but mainly in the USA.

Kennedy said: 'It has been tested locally and globally for clinical and occupational stress-related conditions. Locally it has been tested by UCT's Sports Science Institute human biology department.' Kennedy said the device was sold in South Africa only as part of the 4-hour StressFit programme as it had been shown that people were more likely to use it properly if they had undergone the programme. It has also been approved by the USA's Food and Drug Administration for relaxation training. The product costs R4 695, which includes the four-hour StressFit programme.

Africa

Doctor shortage a worldwide crisis

In Ethiopia just 200 doctors are trained a year for a population of 75 million while in Britain over 6 000 are trained for a population of 60 million. The world is facing a shortage of health workers because not enough people are being trained, according to a new report presented at the recent World Health Assembly. 'The biggest single problem is that we don't educate and train enough,' said Nigel Crisp, who co-chairs a Global Health Workforce Alliance task force aimed at increasing education and training for health workers.

Due to the shortage, about 1 billion people do not get health care or access to health

workers, Crisp told reporters in Geneva. 'We are dealing with an urgent and critical shortage. Without implementing changes, thousands of people in the poorest countries in the world will continue to suffer,' he said. Western countries are often accused of 'poaching' doctors and nurses from the developing world with the lure of better wages, but Crisp said this only accounted for a small percentage of the shortfall.

'We estimate that migration of health workers from poor countries to rich countries amounts to about 12% of the gap in health workers,' he said.

According to a 2006 World Health Organization estimate, there is a global shortage of some 4.3 million health workers. However, to train 1.5 million additional health workers in Africa alone, some 2.6 billion dollars a year is needed.

International

Dogs sniff out cancer

A Japanese centre which says it has trained a dog to sniff out human cancer cells is cloning the animal in South Korea, according to a Seoul bio-technology company and the dog's owner. Cloned fetuses from the black Labrador retriever named Marine were implanted into a surrogate mother dog in April, said Ra Jeong-Chan, president of RNL Bio.

'We are going to see the clones around the end of May,' Ra said. Marine, who is 6½ years old, lost her ability to reproduce when she had her womb removed because of disease. She is owned by Yuji Satoh, a head trainer at St Sugar Cancer Sniffing Dog Training Centre located at Shirahama in Chiba prefecture. Satoh said in Japan that experts from Seoul National University, which created the world's first cloned dog in 2005, had taken some skin samples from Marine and brought them back to South Korea for the project.

'We are making clones of Marine. She is touted as having a world top cancer-sniffing ability. By making her clones, we want to promote studies into cancer-sniffing dogs,' Satoh said. He and the Korean firm which is co-ordinating the project have agreed to produce two clones and train

them at Satoh's centre. One will then be brought back to South Korea for study at the university and the other will stay at the centre. If the project for two pups succeeds, they plan to produce more.

Researchers in several countries are investigating whether dogs have the ability to detect lung, breast, prostate and skin cancer at an early and treatable stage. They believe cancer cells create a scent not present in healthy cells, which can theoretically be picked up by dogs in breath or urine samples.

Animal-human embryos get thumbs up

British lawmakers voted against a bid to ban the creation of animal-human embryos for medical research recently, despite critics, including the Catholic Church, charging the move was unethical. The House of Commons was voting on the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Bill, potentially the biggest shake-up of laws affecting sensitive areas like stem cell research and abortion for nearly two decades. An amendment to outlaw the creation of hybrid embryos, which can ensure a more plentiful supply of stem cells for use in research into treating conditions like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, was defeated by 336 to 176 votes.

Lawmakers also voted against a bid to ban 'saviour siblings' – children created as a close genetic match for a sick brother or sister so their genetic material can help treat them – by 342 to 163 votes. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who wrote an impassioned defence of both measures in a Sunday newspaper, and David Cameron, leader of the main opposition Conservatives, were among those opposed to the proposed bans. Brown's youngest son Fraser, aged nearly two, has cystic fibrosis, a disease which could one day benefit from embryo research. 'I believe that we owe it to ourselves and future generations to introduce these measures and in particular to give our unequivocal backing, within the right framework of rules and standards, to stem cell research,' Brown wrote in the *Observer*.

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