

News bites

South Africa

Smart cards for local hospitals

The Gauteng West Rand Premier Mbhazima Shilowa announced that long queues at provincial hospitals and clinics could soon be a thing of the past, should the government's smart-card plan materialise. In his State of the Province address he painted a picture of a paperless information system that would ensure speedy access to health care in all communities, especially for chronically ill patients. He said the province would develop a computerised card system so patients would just have to 'swipe' their cards when rushed into hospital for medical emergencies or when collecting medicines. 'This system will prevent long queues at dispensaries as pharmacists can immediately begin to package a patient's medicinal supply without having to wait for long. The card system will also help doctors identify the patient's previous treatment and prescribed medication. The doctor will in turn be able to speedily diagnose patients.'

Funding dose for public sector health

Government is placing renewed emphasis on its efforts to address the public sector's critical shortage of doctors and nurses, with an extra R5.3 billion set aside for increasing salaries and recruiting 30 000 more health workers of the medium terms. Of this, R4.5 billion is for better wages. The new wage dispensation is still under negotiation in the public sector bargaining council, and is expected to be implemented on 1 July, according to the national treasury's director for health policy, Mark Bletcher. He said the increased wages would be phased in gradually.

No olive branch from Shisana

The head of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Olive Shisana, has called on government to prioritise treatment for HIV-positive teachers and nurses, saying the country cannot afford to let these key service providers die. 'There is not a single policy or programme that targets these groups ... you have a crisis coming and you can't sit back and treat them like everybody else,' she said.

State won't set up special AIDS clinic for HIV-positive nurses

Health Ministry director-general Thami Mseleku told reporters that the state could

not hold one group of people as more important than another. While there was a need to study the findings of a recent survey showing that one in seven nurses was infected with the disease, government believed it was only 'reflective of the national trend.'

Tribunal to probe axing of 728 KwaZulu nurses

KwaZulu-Natal health MEC Neliswa Nkonyeni has given the tribunal she appointed recently at least 2 months to investigate the provincial health department's dismissal of 728 nurses for an alleged unlawful strike. The sacking of the nurses who went on strike from 22 January to 2 February in protest against not receiving rural allowances has led to a public outcry in the province, with fears of inadequate delivery of services to rural communities. Terms of reference have been agreed to and the tribunal will conduct its investigations in 9 hospitals in the province, with hearings to start soon.

Get patient consent for fees over medical aid rates, urges body

Doctors should charge above medical aid rates only with patient consent, the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) has announced. It was commenting after talks with the Society for General and Family Practitioners (SGFP) and the National Convention on Dispensing (NCD). HPCSA registrar Boyce Mkhize said the council used the National Health Reference Price List as a norm 'because this is the rate at which medical aids reimburse their patients,' and this was not 'a value judgement on its adequacy'.

TB patients 'won't be isolated'

The Health Department said it would not condone the violation of people's rights following a call from scientists for infection monitoring at all airports and border posts and the isolation of patients with extreme drug resistant tuberculosis (XDRTB), even if it were against their will. Scientists have urged the department to isolate people infected with the disease, coercively if necessary, to prevent a global health crisis. They said the danger was grave enough for the government to take tough action to contain the highly contagious TB cases and avoid a potential global epidemic. Health Department spokesperson Sibani Mngadi said: 'All provinces have been able to trace cases of XDRTB. Patients understand the

need for hospitalisation, and none of the XDRTB patients have declined treatment after appropriate counselling.'

Gynaecologist sued for R23 million

The parents of a 3-year-old girl who was born with spina bifida and hydrocephalus (water on the brain) are claiming more than R23 million from the gynaecologist who delivered the child. Adele van Wyk and the child's father Neil Louw, who already have a son (now 9) born with paralysis, said in papers before the Pretoria High Court that they would have aborted the fetus of their second child had they known she was going to be disabled. The parents said their son's disability was already a financial drain on them and they could not afford a second disabled child. Dr Walter Green, who also delivered their first baby, denied any negligence or that he could have detected the deformities beforehand. He also denied that Van Wyk told him she wanted to abort if there were any defects.

Measures taken to better monitor clinical research

South Africa is to strengthen the National Health Act in a move that will make the results of clinical trials fully transparent and accessible to the public. The health department expects to release its draft regulations on 'research on human subjects' soon, which will make it almost impossible for researchers to hide any negative side-effects their studies might have produced. The National Health Research Ethics Council, which had its first meeting two months ago, is in the process of setting up an accrediting process for the various ethics committees in the country so that their standards are uniform. Dr Lindiwe Makubalo, the health department's head of research, said this was to deter researchers who were turned down by one ethics committee from 'hopping' to another committee that had a different viewpoint.

Africa

No school until circumcised

A Kenyan secondary school has turned away 20 boys for being uncircumcised, fearing that they would be bullied, officials said. The boys were turned away last week from Kiriani's Boys' High School in Eastern Province, 3 days after starting school. 'Please do the needful within two weeks and let your son report back

immediately he is well (sic),’ the letter said to parents. A study released in December revealed circumcision reduced the risk of contracting the AIDS virus by about half.

Cholera death toll 150

Cholera is stalking the victims of flooding in southern Africa and has claimed more than 200 lives since the beginning of the year, reports said. Nearly 4 000 cholera cases have been reported since January in Angola after floods left at least 114 dead and 28 000 missing. In Mozambique the death toll from drowning alone was headed for the 100 mark, with 140 000 people in its Zambezi basin displaced. Heavy rains have also affected parts of Zambia and Malawi. The Red Cross reported more than 143 dead in Zambia where more than 400 cases of cholera were recorded.

International

Bones of babies found in hospital yard in India

Police in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh have recovered 390 pieces of bones of newly born babies or fetuses from the backyard of a Christian missionary hospital. ‘The question of female foeticide and infanticide is part of our investigation, as is illegal abortions,’ Superintendent of Police Satish Saxena said from Ratlam town where the grisly find was made in mid-February. Police, acting on a tip-off, dug up the backyard of the hospital and found the pieces of bones – the remains have been sent to a government laboratory in Bhopal for forensic tests. In India, boys are seen as future breadwinners, while girls are often thought to be liabilities because their parents have to pay costly dowries towards their marriages.

Viagra saves baby’s life

Viagra is being used to save premature babies’ lives. Lewis Goodfellow, who was born in the north of Britain 24 weeks premature and who weighed only 681 g, received Viagra after one of his lungs collapsed and not enough oxygen got into his bloodstream. This opened the blood vessels in his lungs to increase the oxygen being captured in the bloodstream and be distributed to the rest of his body. According

to Dr Jeanne Christine Swanepoel, a paediatrician at the Sunninghill Clinic in Sandton, Viagra has already been used for years in premature babies. ‘This is nothing new. Whether it goes to a penis or to the lungs, Viagra ensure better blood flow.’

British may buy Viagra over the counter

Men in Britain are able to purchase the anti-impotency pill, Viagra, over the counter since Valentine’s Day, according to the pharmacy group Alliance Boots. The Boots pharmacies in Manchester began selling the product, which is normally only given with a prescription, over the counter from 14 February. Men between 30 and 65 years can buy 4 Viagra tablets for £50 (R660) without a prescription. The possibility of making Viagra available nationwide later this year, is still ‘under consideration’.

Breastfeeding for better sight

Breast-fed babies grow up to have better eyesight than those given bottled milk, a study has shown. Scientists have found that young children who had been breast-fed had better stereoscopic vision, which is the ability to discern depth. The British research adds to a growing body of evidence that breast milk is the best nutrition for a baby. Dr Geoff Lawson, a paediatrician at Sunderland Royal Hospital in London, said: ‘Among the benefits are immunity, optimal brain development, and optimal growth. Not to mention the social benefits of bonding between mother and baby. No-one ever says breastfeeding is easy, but it is so very, very worthwhile because of the huge number of proven benefits.’

Jump to prevent pregnancy?

Nearly one in three Britons think that if a woman jumps up and down, washes or urinates immediately after sex, she can prevent pregnancy, a survey revealed. This was one of a string of revelations in the survey carried out by the Family Planning Association (FPA) at the start of Contraceptive Awareness Week. It revealed ‘widespread confusion and misunderstanding’ about some of the basic facts, said the FPA, which has called for improved sex and relationship education in schools.

Mending hearts by managing rejection

Connor Geddes was 13 days old when surgeons gave him a new heart that did not match his blood type – deliberately. Connor – now 11 months old and thriving – is one of the several dozen babies around the world to have received mismatched hearts, part of a slowly growing movement to increase these tiniest patients’ survival by taking advantage of a lag in their immune systems. Until recently, transplant centres in the USA were reluctant to try mismatched hearts. Only 19 transplants were performed until 2005. The concern is whether children really fare well years after getting a mismatched heart, or if rejection just sets in later.

Bird flu vaccine is a fact, although the real need for it is questionable

A vaccine for avian influenza is at hand. Now regulators and companies are weighing whether to make it widely available before any outbreak occurs. To date, the H5N1 virus that causes flu has passed only occasionally from birds to humans. The possibility of a mutation of the virus causing a large-scale, highly lethal outbreak among humans motivated big pharmaceutical companies such as GlaxoSmithKline and Sanofi-Aventis to develop vaccines. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) hasn’t approved any of them yet; indeed, the vaccine has yet to get an endorsement from any regulatory agency for use before a pandemic, but some governments are already stockpiling supplies.

Birth deaths rise after caesarean section

Chances of having a stillborn baby is higher in women who previously had a caesarean section, shows a study which was published in Britain recently. This study included almost 82 000 births between 1968 and 1989 and was published in the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*. Although the increase is still relatively low, it should still be a warning to many women who prefer a caesarean section for non-medical reasons.

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