

# News bites

## International

### Mini-robot sets new course for cancer therapy

The idea of a beetle moving around inside your body may be the stuff of horror films. But scientists believe an insect-shaped robot could be a major weapon in the fight against cancer. The device is designed to be inserted into the body through a small incision. Once inside, doctors can control its movements and direct it to areas where investigations are needed. It would be able to capture images through a tiny camera placed in its 'head' – and could deliver drugs through a special injecting device. Early versions have also included tiny forceps for taking tissue samples. In future these nippers could be used to snip out cancerous cells.

### Former psychiatric patient's first novel makes Orange list

A writer who spent a third of her life as a psychiatric patient is in the running for the £30 000 (about R433 000) Orange Prize alongside the winners of the man Booker and Costa awards. Clare Allan, whose novel *Poppy Shakespeare* is set in a psychiatric hospital, was named as one of 20 women on the long list for this year's award. She wrote two unpublished novels before she had a breakdown in her mid 20s. 'People tend to think if you're going to talk about mental health you're going to be incredibly sombre and serious and heartfelt and of course it is serious, but there's an enormous amount of humour and comedy and it's a shame if that doesn't come out.'

## Africa

### Humans and *H. pylori* populate the world

When humans made their way out of Africa some 60 000 years ago to populate the world, they were not alone: They were accompanied by the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori*, which causes gastritis in many people today.

Together, humans and the bacterium spread throughout the entire world. This is the conclusion reached by an international team of scientists led by Mark Achtman from the Max Planck Institute for Infection Biology in Berlin, Germany. The researchers also discovered that differences developed in the genetic makeup of the bacteria populations, just as

it did in that of the various peoples of the world. This has also given scientists new insight into the paths taken by humans as they journeyed across the earth (*Nature*, February 2007). More than half of all human beings are infected with *H. pylori*, a bacterium that can cause stomach ulcers. Like humans, the bacteria are also split up into numerous regional populations.

## South Africa

### Bold new AIDS plan needs huge budget

A draft of South Africa's new AIDS plan was unveiled in an upbeat mood at the recent national consultative conference on HIV/ AIDS, signalling a new era in the government's approach to the epidemic. Political leaders, from Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka to acting Health Minister Jeff Radebe, didn't mince words about the need for the 5-year plan to deliver results. Targets in the national plan include: halving the number of new infections by 2011; reducing mother-to-child transmission of HIV to less than 5%; and providing treatment to 80% of all people diagnosed with HIV. The plan will cost up to three times more than the R14 billion set aside in the national budget.

#### Ten priorities

In unprecedented co-operation, the government and civil society produced 10 priorities for the first 100 days of implementation. These are to:

- put in place a national treatment literacy programme
- initiate an extensive testing campaign led by prominent national and community figures
- scale up behaviour-change interventions to achieve face-to-face coverage higher than 70%
- zoom in on the spike of infection in 18 - 21-year-old women
- zoom in on schools reporting 5 or more pregnancies a year
- renew the national commitment to keep young people at school
- reinforce the positive potential of business and mitigate its negative effect on HIV
- establish a national 'positive prevention' campaign

- focus on key bio-medical interventions that can make a big impact
- the first 100 days should set clear benchmarks of progress.

### Time is past for silly arguments over sex work – TAC

The time for silly arguments about the decriminalisation of prostitution is long past, the Treatment Action Campaign said, as it threw its weight behind a proposal to legitimise sex workers as a way to fight HIV and AIDS. 'The time for silly moralising about whether sex work is right or not is long past,' said TAC spokesman Nathan Geffen. He was responding to a plan emanating from the recent HIV/AIDS conference in Gauteng that proposed decriminalising prostitution as a means to fight the disease. Removing the legal constraints would allow the industry to become safer through proper regulation. Geffen said a glaring gap in current efforts to fight the disease was that there was currently no HIV and AIDS awareness programmes directed at sex workers.

### SA urged to beef up action on TB

South Africa has to improve tuberculosis programmes to reach 2015 targets set by the World Health Organization (WHO), Stop TB executive secretary Dr Marcos Espinal has warned.

Although SA had begun strengthening its anti-TB initiatives and was one of only a handful of countries funding its own programmes, HIV/AIDS and the emergence of extremely drug resistant (XDR) TB threatened to undermine gains made in the fight against the disease.

'If SA puts together a huge effort with strong political leadership ... it might reach those goals. But the opportunity [must be taken] now,' said Espinal in a telephone interview from Geneva. He urged South African health authorities to improve collaboration between HIV and TB programmes, as people infected with HIV are vulnerable to TB, with their immune systems weakened. SA's XDR TB outbreak last year reflected weaknesses in its TB control programmes, he said.

### Dial-a-fix brings drugs to the doorstep

Johannesburg's drug epidemic has exploded onto people's doorsteps. Police and rehab centres say they are battling a new enemy in the war against drugs as dealers move away from street sales to

home delivery. Gone are the days when a user had to risk going into dangerous areas such as Hillbrow or Yeoville to buy drugs. Now, all it takes is a phone call or an SMS to a dealer, and within 15 minutes, any drug – be it heroin, cocaine, or dagga – can be dropped off at a person's home, office or even at a restaurant.

### Unit renews hope for hundreds of anxious women

Big giddy smiles – and some tears – have greeted the official opening of a world-class breast examination centre at Helen Joseph Hospital in Johannesburg, complete with feminine touches that only concerned women doctors could have provided. Department head Dr Sue Lucas struggled for more than a year to open the new unit as there were crippling staff shortages. Luckily, her plight came to the attention of the private sector, and a concerned group of radiologists and radiographers decided to give up their Human Rights Day to satisfy the health rights of a few hundred women less privileged than they are. After the first day, at least two life-saving operations have been scheduled for the next two weeks for women who have been carrying around near-fatal malignancies in their breasts.

### Dr Manto has steep hill to climb

A long recovery road with terrible discomfort lies ahead for Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, Minister of Health, says a doctor who has undergone a liver transplant himself. The first 2 weeks would be very uncomfortable, says Dr Jan de Kock (47), an oral surgeon from Richards Bay. He received his second chance 4 years ago, after he was put on the waiting list for a year. According to the South African Transplant Association, Tshabalala-Msimang was put on the list under a false identity. All that the hospitals knew was that it was a very sick patient who needed a liver urgently. Lucky for her, a suitable donor was found with the correct blood type and the right size liver. Dr Sue Tiger, an academic medical director, later said that according to their current waiting list at the Donald Gordon Centre, the minister 'qualified as the person who was most in need of a liver at that particular time in terms of severity of condition and size match compatibility'. Her physician, Professor Jeff Wing, said that she will have to take immunosuppressive drugs for the rest of her life to ensure that her body doesn't reject the new liver.

### Fired surgeon receives one year's salary

A chief surgeon who allegedly told nursing staff that 98% of his patients were black and that he could kill them all if he wanted, was found to be unreasonably dismissed. Ms Faith Bantwini, arbitrator in the conciliatory council of the health and welfare sector, ordered that the Eastern Cape Department of Health had to pay Dr Jan de Swardt from the Uitenhage Provincial Hospital 12 months' salary after he was fired in November 2005. This amounts to approximately R240 000. It was found that his dismissal was procedurally unreasonable, because De Swardt did not receive a copy of the complaint against him during the disciplinary case; he was not given the opportunity to have a representative to defend him; he was not permitted to cross-examine some of the witnesses; and was dismissed before his department could raise their final demonstration.

### TB patients ordered back to their beds

Thirteen infectious tuberculosis patients who forced their way out of Pretoria West Hospital have been ordered back to their beds. They wanted to be treated as outpatients. This follows an interim High Court order after the Gauteng Health Department lodged an interdict against them. Department spokesman Vusi Sibiyi said the 'highly infected' TB patients would be forced to stay at Sizwe Hospital until their treatment was finished. 'Most of them will be there less than 6 months or so ... there is security to ensure they do not abscond.'

### 'AIDS-cure' sent for tests

The state decided to send a sample of the herb *Ubhejane*, which is bartered as a cure of HIV/AIDS in KwaZulu-Natal, for forensic tests. This comes approximately a year after Advocate Shamila Batoyi, director of public prosecution in this province, said the matter should be investigated because there was 'definite testimony' that the selling of the herb transgresses a few articles in the Health Professions Act. The Democratic Alliance (DA) also handed in a complaint of fraud against Mr Zebolon Gwala at the time, after he told two members of the DA that the herb could cure HIV/AIDS. Apparently Gwala's grandfather told him in a dream what herbs to mix. DA health spokesman Gareth Morgan said that the government's new AIDS and HIV programme would suffer if action was not taken against

'fraudsters getting rich on the suffering of people with AIDS'. The Health Department previously slammed the DA for wanting a crackdown on Gwala, accusing the party of running a 'publicity campaign' and being 'arrogant' in its approach to traditional African medicine.

### Medical scheme benefits for 2007

SAMA has made a spreadsheet available regarding the benefits that 85% of medical schemes are likely to pay to doctors for their services in 2007. This information has been compiled by the Society for General and Family Practitioners (SGFP) (an affiliated group of SAMA), and the National Convention on Dispensing (NCD), of which SAMA is a member.

Since a ruling by the Competition Commissioner in 2003 against anti-competitive behaviour in the health care funding industry, schemes have had to determine their own tariffs for doctors' services and patient benefits.

While there are still no regulations in place to facilitate the publication of the National Health Reference Price List (NHRPL) for 2007, this process is underway. In the interim, the spreadsheet gives an indication of schemes' tariffs as well as schemes that accept balanced-billing and those that pay out more than the CMS recommended inflator of 4.9% on the 2006 NHRPL. These schemes are colour coded in blue and yellow, respectively.

Meanwhile SAMA is also studying the increments made by the funding industry, as well as recommendations made by managed care and other organisations on adjustments to tariffs by service providers for 2007, and will report on the outcome in due course.

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