

# News bites

## International

### Stomach stapling 'great for women'

Women who have their stomachs stapled not only lose weight, they also may reduce their cancer risk by up to 40 per cent, new research says. In a study of more than 2 000 fat people who had surgery to reduce the size of their stomachs, Swedish researchers found that women who had the procedure were less likely to get cancer than those who did not. But for some reason, the surgery didn't have the same effect in men; there was virtually no difference in the cancer rates in men who had the surgery and those who did not. The research was recently published online in *Lancet Oncology*.

A previous study has shown that stomach stapling surgery can prolong the lives of men and women by up to 10 years compared with those who don't have it. Two other studies have suggested that women in particular benefit from a lower cancer risk after getting the weight loss operation.

Scientists have long thought fat people have a higher cancer risk, possibly because fat cells produce hormones that might lead to the disease. But doctors haven't been able to prove that losing weight in other ways, including dieting, reduces that risk. 'This is one more piece of evidence in a complex puzzle,' said Dr Len Lichtenfeld of the American Cancer Society, who was not linked to the study. 'There seems to be a relationship between weight and cancer, but there is a missing link we don't understand.' Swedish researchers followed up 2 010 obese patients from 1987 after they had their stomachs stapled, for about 10 years.

### Man with broken neck told to take painkillers

A hospital in Sydney, Australia recently apologised after a man was told to go home and take headache tablets even though he was suffering from a broken neck that could have paralysed him at any moment. Sydney-based Paul Curtis said he was lucky not to be a paraplegic after the mix-up last month at Ryde Hospital in the city's north. The 31-year-old went to the emergency ward on a Friday night suffering severe pain after accidentally clashing heads with a friend. He was told the X-ray department was closed and he should go home and take some paracetamol.

Curtis followed the advice but returned to the hospital on Monday morning after suffering an agonising weekend, only to find that a bone was broken in his neck, threatening to sever his spinal cord.

Curtis underwent surgery and faces months of rehabilitation wearing a neck brace. 'When the doctor told me "you're lucky to be alive, you're lucky not to be a paraplegic," that really rattled me a bit,' he said. The head of Ryde Hospital's emergency department Peter Roberts said late-night procedures for patients needing X-rays would be reviewed in light of the case.

## Africa

### Rioting prisoners rape 20 women

The United Nations blames a growing wave of attempted jail breaks and mutinies in the Congo's prison system on a lack of food and access to health care.

Rioting inmates raped around 20 female prisoners during a failed prison break in the Democratic Republic of Congo's violence-ravaged east, the country's UN peace-keeping mission said. Two people were killed and 12 others were injured when prisoners detonated two grenades inside the central prison in Goma, capital of the eastern border province of North Kivu, during an overnight escape attempt.

'The group of mutinying soldiers ... raped around 20 female inmates,' said the statement released by the UN mission, known as MONUC. Congolese police and military surrounded the prison, which holds a number of rebel and militia fighters, soon after the riots began, and no prisoners escaped.

With small budgets and poor facilities, Congolese prisons are generally overcrowded. Malnutrition and easily preventable illnesses are common. In many cases, soldiers, women, and children are mixed in with the general inmate population. New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused Congolese authorities of repeatedly ignoring calls to improve the country's crumbling prison infrastructure and failing to protect vulnerable inmates.

## South Africa

### National health insurance (NHI) – the storm clouds gather

Battle lines have been drawn around the NHI plan, with the DA slamming the

government for interfering with private health care and the ANC saying urgent intervention is vital because private health care has become 'less affordable'.

Chairman of the ANC subcommittee on education and health and member of the NHI task team, Dr Zweli Mkhize, last month promised that his party would consult key stakeholders on the mandatory health insurance proposals.

Mkhize claimed the NHI would 'cure the ills of the health care system', which had suffered under-funding, deteriorating state facilities and quality of care which resulted in the exodus of skilled personnel.

Mkhize, who is also KZN premier, said universal access to a basic package of services for both the rich and the poor would be achieved. DA leader Helen Zille agreed that health care needed 'drastic' improvement because it provided 'excellent' services to a minority in the private sector and 'poor and deteriorating' services to the public sector. However, the proposed system would 'hurt' taxpayers. The insurance would deepen failures by public health, reduce benefits to the private sector and 'demoralise' doctors and nurses, while becoming a burden to taxpayers, who would have to foot its R100 billion-a-year price tag. The system would also increase the health budget by 40 per cent. 'Private health providers would receive less per patient. Everyone will be allowed three visits to their chosen doctor or clinic. 'The NHI would get funding from taxes, a new compulsory pay-roll levy and public medical scheme contributions. Cuban doctors would be brought in to make up the shortfall in SA doctors.'

The private sector's opening shots centred on what specialist economist in public policy, health and social security, Alex van der Heever, called 'over-compensation in the form of the grand gesture'.

These included predictions of an overall patient benefits result equal to about one-quarter of those currently available to private scheme members and further crumbling of state hospitals which, unless first fixed, would render the NHI a white elephant.

### HIV 'cure' on our website not a problem – ANC

The 10 000 young people who visit the ANC Youth League's official website every month are seeing paid advertisements from a South African company selling a herbal product as a remedy for AIDS. The

advertisement, seen at the bottom of the main page last month, reads 'Herbs that may kill HIV' and invites users to click to learn more. A league media spokesperson who was shown the Revivo advertisement denied it was a cause for concern. 'It's just an ad. Don't read too much into it,' said Magdalene Moonsamy. But Rebecca Hodes of the Treatment Action Campaign said TAC was in the process of investigating the company, Revivo, whose office is in Cape Town. The company came to TAC's attention after a number of calls from people asking if the product would work for them. The inquiries have been coming 'consistently,' said Hodes.

The Youth League has been selling advertising space on its website since January, said webmaster Oscar Masubelele. Previously, it had relied on donations, which failed to cover the costs of maintaining the website. Private advertisers were also approached, but the response was poor. Now, advertisements co-ordinated by Google keep the website running at its estimated cost of R35 000 a month. This includes the cost of electricity, band width and manpower, said Masubelele. There are no mechanisms in place to control what is advertised on the site. Hodes expressed concern about the target audience of the advertisement on the website.

Youth had the highest HIV prevalence rate in South Africa, she said, and they were 'essential' in the fight against the virus. But Moonsamy defended the advertisement policy. 'As a political organisation, we need to find ways of funding,' she said. She denied that the Youth League has a responsibility to monitor its website's content. She said young people were in a position to evaluate the advertisement for themselves.

### **I'm sick of the media's witch-hunt – Manto**

Former health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang has refused to comment on reports that the alleged thief of her medical records is to be extradited from New Zealand. Instead she flew into a

rage, accusing journalists of a 'witch-hunt' against her. 'Stop hunting me. Just leave me alone and give me my peace of mind,' Tshabalala-Msimang – now a backbench ANC MP – demanded recently when asked to comment on reports that a nurse was to be extradited to stand trial. This follows a criminal investigation into the theft of medical records relating to Tshabalala-Msimang's stay in the Cape Town Medi-Clinic in 2005 for a shoulder operation.

The records, which were leaked to the *Sunday Times*, revealed that Tshabalala-Msimang was abusive towards staff in what the newspaper referred to as 'drunken tantrums' and sent them to buy her alcohol, despite a liver condition. Tshabalala-Msimang had a liver transplant in 2007 because of what doctors described as an auto-immune disease.

### **Shop bust over 'milk scam'**

Police last month arrested an owner of a grocery shop in Marlboro for allegedly selling formula milk that was supposed to be delivered to hospitals. Inspector Moses Maphakela said police received a tip-off that the store, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and First Street, was selling NAN baby formula intended for HIV-positive mothers who cannot breastfeed their babies. 'The powder milk container had the words "not for sale" written all over it.' The stock, worth about R30 000, is the property of the health department and was meant to be distributed to state hospitals. 'We arrested the owner, a 49-year-old male, and he will appear in the Wynberg Magistrate's Court on a charge of being in possession of suspected stolen property.' Recently the department was attacked because it had failed to pay formula supplier Nestlé for 6 months.

### **Nurses caring less?**

More than 350 nurses have been found guilty of professional misconduct since 2003, with offences ranging from physical assault, sexual abuse, maternity and medication-related cases, fraud and poor basic nursing care. Over this period, 52 nurses have

been barred from practising. This was mostly in cases of professional misconduct that involved the rape of patients, wrong administration of medication and assault of patients, causing grievous bodily harm. Since July 2008, the SA Nursing Council has received 432 complaints of professional misconduct against nurses in both the public and the private sector. However, nurses in the public sector have come under criticism more than those in the private sector.

In the last 3 months the *Pretoria News* has reported on alleged incidents of gross negligence by nurses in Tshwane hospitals which have resulted in death, suffering or humiliation of patients. In February, an elderly patient, Moratwe Letlhabi, died at the George Mukhari Hospital after being scalded by boiling water while under the care of nurses. Following numerous questions posed to the Gauteng Department of Health, there are still no answers as to how an extremely sick patient who was confined to his bed managed to walk to the bathroom and get into a bathtub full of boiling water without being noticed.

Letlhabi's family has accused the nurse who was in charge on the night, and who apparently took leave immediately after the incident. Although the department said an investigation was under way, attempts to get the results or find out about the progress of the investigation were fruitless.

In another recent case of negligence by nurses, an elderly patient lay in his own faeces for 3 days, despite continuous pleas for help from nursing staff at the Steve Biko Academic Hospital.

In another incident, 3 women were forced to give birth without assistance at the Soshanguve Community Health Centre. The women were made to go through all this suffering while nurses laughed, threatened them and continued to drink tea instead of doing their job.

**CHRIS BATEMAN**