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International

Parents flouting China's 1-child policy

China faces a looming baby boom as newly rich couples find they can afford to pay fines incurred from having more than 1 child. Xinhua news agency quoted China's top family planning official as saying that upward pressure on the birth rate is also coming from millions of Chinese in their 20s and 30s who are allowed 2 children under the policy – because they themselves were single children. China adopted its 1-child policy in 1979 to curb population growth. It encourages late marriages and late childbearing and limits most urban couples to 1 child and most rural couples to 2 children. The government claims the policy has led to 400 million fewer births in a nation of 1.3 billion people, but it is controversial. Many families want to keep having children until a male heir is born.

Drug giant 'sorry' for false drink claims

GlaxoSmithKline, the world's second-largest food and pharmaceutical company, said sorry in nationwide advertising campaigns early in May for misleading New Zealand and Australian consumers about the vitamin C content of its Ribena blackcurrant drink. The apology follows prosecution by New Zealand's watchdog Consumer Commission after two 14-year-old Auckland schoolgirls on a science project tested the drink and found it contained no traceable amounts of the vitamin. The company admitted in March to breaching the Fair Trading Act with false claims about the health benefits of Ribena and was fined a total of 227 500 New Zealand dollars (about R1.1-million) on 15 representative charges.

Songs in the key of life

Proteins, the complex molecules of life, have been sequenced into classical music, researchers in the US reported early in May. Rie Takahashi and Jeffrey Miller of the University of California, Los Angeles, used parts of amino acids – the building blocks of proteins – to devise a 20-note range spanning two octaves. Their inspiration: thymidylate synthase A, or ThyA, a protein that in a flawed form plays a part in types of cancer. The work builds on previous innovation, using the code for

DNA. But DNA has only four potential 'notes' – the compounds that make up the rungs on the double-helix ladder – and this is musically limiting. Takahashi and Miller believe their brainchild will be useful for getting young people interested in genomic biology.

Netcare director off to Paris seat

Medical Director of Netcare 911 Dr Glenn Staples has been appointed chairman of the Paris-based International Assistance Group. The organisation represents 30 member companies providing global medical, travel and evacuation assistance services. Each company represents specific countries. Netcare 911 has been a member since 2003. The election of Dr Staples bears testament that 'he adds to the forum and also to the status of South African emergency services,' the company said.

Super pill does not take any nonsense from these mutations

A new remedy which allows the body to produce functional protein in spite of the so-called 'nonsense mutations' in genes, will be able to treat approximately 2 000 genetic illnesses. According to an article on the website of *Public Health Genetics*, between 5% and 15% of cases of genetic illnesses are caused by mutations which basically implant a stop sign in advance and these are called 'nonsense mutations'.

Africa

Teenage pregnancy in Africa comes under the spotlight

Some shocking figures regarding the prevalence of adolescent pregnancy in sub-Saharan Africa were presented at the 19th Annual World Congress on Fertility and Sterility held in Durban's International Convention Centre in early May.

Speaking on the health consequences of teenage pregnancy in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigerian professor of gynaecology, E Oluwole Akande, said the highest incidence of such pregnancies occurred in the sub-Saharan region, with an average rate of birth per 1 000 females aged (15 – 19) of 143. This is well above the world average of 65 and a sure indication that teenage pregnancy – along with the attendant health complications – is one of the more pressing medical problems faced by the African continent.

Muslim women return to 'innocence' – thanks to op

It is becoming increasingly popular among young women of north African descent in France to have their hymen re-sewn, technically making them virgins again. Most of these women have the operation done to respect their culture or family traditions, not for religious reasons. Unable to cope with breaking family tradition, some of these women feel that a hymenoplasty would help put their lives back together again, as they are expected to be a virgin when they get married.

South Africa

Holding out on incompetence

Health departments in the provinces have lost millions of rands in the past 3 years because the national department detained provisional grants at local level owing to bad planning and negligence. A total amount of R86 million was detained, but eventually paid out to provinces. In the same year (2005 - 2006) the department detained R288.5 million from the Eastern Cape, Free-State, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Western Cape because they underspent on their budgets. According to Minister Tshabalala-Msimang's reply to Mr Gareth Morgan, DA spokesperson for health, there has been 'visible progress' to ensure that provincial departments comply with the necessary requirements so that the money can be made available.

SAMA slams Western Cape tertiary cuts

The South African Medical Association (SAMA) has slammed as 'totally unacceptable' the forfeiture of tertiary services at Groote Schuur, Tygerberg and Red Cross hospitals to assist the funding of health care restructuring in the Western Cape.

Dr Kgosi Letlape, Chairperson of SAMA, said he was 'gravely concerned' by the recent announcement of the Western Cape Department of Health that it intends closing 90 beds at Groote Schuur and Tygerberg hospitals. While SAMA supported the establishment and improvement of health services at primary and secondary levels of care, it found the undermining of tertiary services 'totally unacceptable'. Letlape said the decade-long targeting of academic hospitals as the

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means of funding provincial health budget deficits in the Western Cape was 'draining the life blood from tertiary medicine in the province, and the country. These hospitals provide unique and essential services which we cannot afford to continually sacrifice for the purpose of meeting budgetary constraints. They are not only national assets but the well-spring of the country's health professionals who are critical in ensuring sustainability of the multi-layered health care system.'

The cuts would not only jeopardise the training of doctors and other health care professionals but impoverish research in the country and undoubtedly weaken the primary and secondary levels of health care. The health of communities was clearly at risk with 'these recurring and heartless cuts.'

Letlape also said, 'This latest blow surely flies in the face of the statement made by the Western Cape Department of Health in their *Comprehensive Service Plan for*

2010 which claims that health services in the Western Cape will be need-driven services as opposed to budget-driven.' The root of the problem was the chronic underfunding of the public sector. The lack of commitment to adequate funding needed to be addressed 'urgently.' Letlape called for a moratorium on bed cuts and the budget proposals as they currently stand.

AIDS Association's director cannot say where money went

Managers and other employees of the National Association for People with AIDS (Napwa) allege that the director is earning four salaries while he cannot give account of what happened to the Association's funds. Napwa members are accusing Mr Mkululeko Nxesi of financial mismanagement. Workers at this Association have warned Nxesi on various occasions over the past 3 months that he must resign or 'be forcefully removed'.

Uys slates SA's policy on AIDS

Satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys entered the controversy around the Soccer World Cup 2010 stadiums, suggesting just one less stadium would allow for the perfection of the female condom, 'so billions of women around the world have the capacity to protect themselves'. And that was just the start of the stabs he took at politicians over their role in the country's HIV/ AIDS crisis, warning people not to wait for the government to help them, but to help themselves. Calling Apartheid the first virus and HIV the second to afflict South Africa, Uys revealed that he had visited 700 schools and talked to more than 1 million pupils in the last 6 years in his personal bid to do as much talking, as openly as possible, to get his HIV message across.

CHRIS BATEMAN

single suture

Polio eradication under threat

The World Health Organization's efforts to eradicate polio are being threatened by violence and misinformation. In February, a Pakistani doctor was killed by a remote-controlled bomb after trying to persuade villagers to have their children vaccinated against the disease. In Pakistan, Afghanistan and among Muslim communities in India some local clerics have denounced vaccination as a plot to sterilise Muslims, similar to the rumours that stopped vaccination in Nigeria in 2003.

In Pakistan, some clerics have even declared that preventing epidemics is 'contrary to Islamic law' and have described people infected with polio as martyrs. Senior Muslims have now issued pro-vaccination fatwa decrees in response. Mothers even get their children vaccinated secretly.

But the WHO have renewed their commitment to eradicating polio at a projected cost of \$575 million on top of the \$5.3 billion already spent worldwide. They have, however, not put a time frame on the eradication effort.

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