

News bites

International

Swine flu could tip world into deflation

The global swine flu pandemic could tip the world into deflation, stalling economies just as they struggle to recover from the financial crisis, a British study says.

Recovery could be delayed by a couple of years in a country like Britain, the worst hit in Europe, and is quickly spreading around the world, said the study. Comparing swine flu to major health crises, including SARS in 2003, the Oxford Economics study said much depends on how many people are infected by the H1N1 virus. 'Although so far the social and economic impacts have been very small, if infection rates were to rise much further, significant costs could be expected,' it said. 'The SARS economic shock proved short-lived. Asian economies were growing very strongly when SARS broke out. As soon as the epidemic was perceived to be under control, consumption resumed and very strong growth returned.' But it warned: 'This time around, such a sharp rebound is unlikely.' Swine flu threatens to keep millions of workers at home, while consumption and travel will be hit due to public health fears. 'GDP loss during the six months of the pandemic would amount to around five per cent in the UK,' it said, adding that calculation was based on a 30% infection rate and 0.4% death rate. England's chief medical officer, Liam Donaldson, said that in a worst-case scenario, around a third of Britain's population could be infected and 65 000 killed. 'There is a risk that swine flu tips the UK and the world economy into deflation. This is because the pandemic would hit at a time when businesses and banks are still reeling from the economic crisis,' the report authors said.

Data disprove IPT resistance fears

This year's International AIDS Society TB-HIV research prize was awarded to Dr Clare van Helsema of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK, for her study on isoniazid prevention therapy (IPT) conducted in a community of South African gold miners.

Dr Van Helsema's data showed no evidence of increased resistance to isoniazid (INH) in TB cases, and outcomes for TB treatment were good.

Although recommended by international guidelines, IPT implementation remains

limited due to controversy over its long-term effects on drug resistance. In people living with HIV (PLHIV), the reasoning goes, sub-clinical levels of TB disease may be present, and that giving INH will select for resistant bacteria. There is a lack of conclusive data on the subject.

Wrote Dr Van Helsema: 'Implementation of IPT has been limited, partly due to concerns about promoting drug resistance, but the prevalence of isoniazid resistance was not significantly different from controls.'

This would suggest that fears surrounding IPT and drug resistance are without basis. Given the benefits of IPT to PLHIV, this study lends weight to the argument that IPT should be implemented in all national HIV programmes.

'Closing schools won't stop pandemics'

Closing schools at the first sign of a new pandemic might delay the worst, so health officials can prepare but cannot prevent the spread of the disease, British researchers said last month. And while closing schools might spread out demands on hospitals, it could disrupt health care services and the rest of the economy in other ways, Neil Ferguson of Imperial College London and colleagues said. Writing in *Lancet Infectious Diseases*, they said governments need to devise plans for when and how to close schools if the pandemic of H1N1 swine flu worsens. 'The H1N1 pandemic could become more severe, and so the current cautious approach of not necessarily recommending school closure in Europe and North America might need reappraisal in the autumn,' they wrote.

At the peak of the epidemic in the USA, more than 700 schools closed, according to the US Department of Education.

Officials at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that more than a million Americans have been infected with the new H1N1 virus. The World Health Organization said the flu was too widespread to make counting individual cases possible and called the virus 'unstoppable'. Ferguson and colleagues studied past pandemics of influenza in 1918, 1957 and 1968, as well as patterns of disease spread during French school holidays and a teacher's strike in Israel. Infections fell when schools closed but rates rose immediately again when children returned to school, they noted.

Three held – human egg-trafficking case

Three people have been arrested in a suspected human egg-trafficking case at a fertility clinic set up by Israeli doctors in Bucharest, the Romanian news agency Newsin reported. 'An investigation is currently under way ... and tens of people have been questioned so far,' police spokeswoman Gabriela Neagu said, declining to reveal further details. According to Newsin, two Israeli doctors were arrested as well as a Romanian employee from the Sabyc clinic which specialises in *in vitro* fertilisation and plastic surgery.

Prosecutors are also investigating three Romanian doctors and have banned the two Israeli doctors from leaving the country, it said.

Africa

Beware of fake drugs

Fake and substandard prescription drugs are increasingly becoming a problem in less developed countries, a study released last month said. Nearly half the drugs sold in Angola, Burundi and the Congo are substandard, the report co-sponsored by the International Policy Network of London and the Health Policy Unit, a division of the Free Market Foundation of South Africa, claimed. It also said about two-thirds of anti-malarial drugs available in Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam contain insufficient active ingredients. They estimated that fake tuberculosis and malaria drugs kill about 700 000 people a year. Fake drugs also lead to increased levels of drug resistance. The researchers said many countries have corrupt regulatory and legal systems that are easily exploited by criminal counterfeiters, so additional rules will only increase corruption. The researchers believe that in South Africa the government's laws on capping what pharmacists can charge for drugs, led to the closure of rural and township pharmacies and deprived the communities of trained pharmacists. This, they allege, increases the risk of being exposed to fake medicines. They propose identity preservation systems using unique codes verifiable through a simple text message and more effective trademark systems. They also believe that overwhelming bureaucracy in trying to license or test a medicine contributes to the problem. Report author Julian Harris was quoted as saying: 'Many poor countries

have weak or non-existent trademark laws, so it's no surprise that counterfeits are rife'. A free press, free courts, and free trade would actually increase the quality of medicines.

South Africa

Health workers at high risk for contracting TB

Health care workers in KwaZulu-Natal are almost six times more likely to contract drug-resistant tuberculosis than the general population in the province, a poster presentation at the 5th IAS Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention (IAS 2009) revealed this July.

Boston University researcher Max O'Donnell was awarded the International AIDS Society/Agence Nationale de Recherches sur le SIDA award for his abstract 'High incidence of multidrug resistant and extensively drug resistant tuberculosis among South African health care workers'.

Preliminary results of O'Donnell's research at King George TB Hospital found that health care workers employed in this endemic area were substantially more likely to have either MDR or XDR TB than non-health care workers.

'The higher incidence rate among the health care workers is explained by occupational exposure and not other risk factors. We are comfortable that they are being infected due to patient exposure,' said O'Donnell.

Don't write us off yet – microbicide researchers

Prevention scientists attending the 5th IAS Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention (IAS 2009) have cautioned against not preparing for the success of Microbicides and Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) trials.

Results from a clinical trial released earlier this year by the Microbicides Trial Network (MTN) showed that PRO 2000 vaginal gel showed promise with a 30% HIV prevention rate.

MDP is currently running a phase III trial on PRO 2000 involving more than 9 389 women and aims to release the results by the end of the year.

Another study underway is the MTN-001 trial, an adherence and drug absorption study. It will determine whether antiretrovirals can be used effectively for HIV prevention in the form of an

applicator gel or a pill that can be taken orally once a day – also known as PrEP.

The MTN-001 study is investigating issues that will inform a follow-up study by the Vaginal and Oral Intervention to Control the Epidemic (VOICE).

VOICE, whose trials are set to begin in Zimbabwe in August, will address whether women will be more comfortable applying a gel every day or taking a pill daily.

Pay our core deliverers – NGOs plead

The AIDS Law Project and several other organisations are calling for an urgent meeting with several Ministers to review the employment of community health care workers at lawfully commensurate pay rates, with a view to ensuring permanent jobs within the departments of health and social development.

The concerned organisations are responding to numerous complaints made by community health care workers who cannot afford transport to work or food unless sufficient, regular pay is received.

They also want the ministers to alter the role of the approximately 1 600 community non-profit organisations involved, to become one of training, support, monitoring and management – rather than their current role as employers of, or labour brokers for, community health care workers.

Many community health care workers (CHCWs) are the stewards of public health in hospitals and clinics throughout the country. They are essential if these departments are to succeed in the implementation of national strategic plans to combat HIV and TB and, ultimately, in the attainment of national health and development goals. The deployment of CHCWs in HIV and TB service provision accords with the provisions set out in the National Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS and STIs. At issue are employment conditions which are fair, particularly regular pay.

CHCWs – largely women – are the bulwarks of service delivery in many public clinics and hospitals, assessing and preparing patients for antiretroviral treatment readiness; providing adherence counselling; counselling for pregnant women regarding infant feeding choices; and identifying patients who qualify for ART. They also provide advice on obtaining grants, and some provide home-based care. Currently, the Department of Health makes payments to the NGOs, and the NGOs in turn administer a monthly stipend.

'Today I'm a new man'

When he is discharged from hospital, Steve Swanepoel hopes to ride a bicycle for the first time in nearly 30 years. 'I would like to cycle and jog. I was not able to do that before,' said a smiling Swanepoel from his bed in the Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre (DGMC) in Parktown. 'Today I'm a new man.' The 58-year-old father of five from Bloemfontein was a life-long haemophiliac – until a liver transplant cured his haemophilia. Swanepoel is the first haemophiliac to undergo an organ transplant in South Africa. 'The thing you learn is: you can do it,' said Professor Russell Britz, who led the transplant team at DGMC.

Britz said it was known that a new liver would cure haemophilia, although this is not used as treatment. 'The transplant was obviously done for the hepatitis, not for the haemophilia.' It's the 107th liver transplant the unit has done.

How camera phone brought disorder into focus

Norwegian doctors are singing the praises of the camera phone, saying the tiny device installed in most cell phones these days can be a useful medical tool. In an unusual case reported in last month's *British Medical Journal*, obstetricians at St Olav's University Hospital in Trondheim report how a 25-year-old pregnant woman used her camera phone to provide pictures that helped them to diagnose a rare but excruciating disorder. She told the doctors that an agonising pain would shoot through her breasts whenever her fingers, toes or nipples got cold, such as when walking barefoot on a cold floor or taking a shower. The pain typically lasted between 5 minutes and 15 minutes and was so extreme as to bring her to tears. The colour of the nipples also changed, to white and then to blue, as the pain intensified, and finally to red as the pain subsided and was replaced by numbness. The unnamed patient presented three photographs from her camera phone showing the colour changes in a typical episode. Aided by the pictures, the doctors were able to diagnose a condition called Raynaud's phenomenon of the nipple. After treatment, her symptoms completely disappeared within a week. 'Ordinary camera phones deliver high-quality photographs, which can help doctors make uncommon diagnoses,' the case report says.

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