

News bites

International

Smaller heart pump hailed by surgeons

Doctors in Germany have successfully implanted the world's smallest artificial heart pump, billed as more effective and unobtrusive than earlier devices, the University Hospital of Heidelberg revealed last month.

The first recipient, a 50-year-old woman, received the 92 g pump made of plastic and titanium in late July and is now leading a normal life with it at home. 'It can fully replace the function of the heart's left ventricle and works particularly quietly and effectively,' said the director of the cardiac surgery division of the hospital, Matthias Karck. The device can also help patients bridge the time until a heart donor can be found for a transplant.

The pump is the fifth generation of the so-called DeBakey Heart developed by the late US cardiac surgeon Michael DeBakey in the 1990s. It can be worn adjacent the ailing heart and allows for external electronic monitoring and adjustment.

Genes may impact your time in dreamland

The amount of sleep needed each night may depend less on fluffy pillows than a single genetic mutation, according to research published this August. A team of scientists claim they have identified a gene that regulates the optimum amount of human sleep each individual needs, explaining why after 6 hours of slumber one person may awake reborn, while another is like the living dead. The study, published in *Science* last month, identified a mother and daughter pair who needed well below the 8.5 hours a night that doctors say is a must for long-term well-being. Blood tests from the rested pair showed a mutation in their *DEC2* gene, which has previously been implicated in the control of circadian rhythms – the cycles that regulate the daily patterns of human behaviour. Lead scientist Ying Hui Fu, a professor of neurology at the University of California, said her team then tested their findings on genetically modified mice and fruit flies. The animals were observed scampering around in the dark more and sleeping less. Fu said the observations 'could provide an explanation for why human subjects with the mutation are able to live unaffected by short amounts

of sleep throughout their lives'. It is still unclear whether the mutation affects sleep quantity alone or also wakefulness.

Aspirin reduces colon cancer risk – study

Taking aspirin can not only help keep colon cancer from coming back, but it can also lower the risk of dying from the disease, USA researchers said last month. Aspirin already occupies a prominent spot in many medicine cabinets, low doses staving off heart attacks and strokes, as well as chasing away aches and pains. Other studies have found it can reduce the risk of developing colon cancer. The latest study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, shows it can prevent colorectal cancer deaths. Dr Andrew Chan of Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School in Boston and colleagues studied aspirin use in 1 279 men and women with colorectal cancer that had not spread to other parts of the body.

Some conditions misdiagnosed as bipolar disorder

A study published last year suggested that bipolar disorder may be over-diagnosed in people seeking mental health care. Now new findings shed light on which disorders many of these patients actually have. Bipolar disorder, previously known as manic depression, involves dramatic mood swings – ranging from debilitating depression to euphoric recklessness. In the original 2008 study, researchers at Brown University School of Medicine found that of 145 adults who said they had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, 82 (57%) turned out not to have the condition when given a comprehensive diagnostic interview.

In this latest study, published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, the researchers used similar standardised interviews to find out which disorders those 82 patients might have.

Overall, they found, nearly half had major depression, while borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalised anxiety and social phobia were each diagnosed in roughly one-quarter to one-third.

When the researchers then compared the patients with 528 other psychiatric patients who had never been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, they found that

those in the former group were nearly four times more likely to have borderline personality disorder. They were also 70% more likely to have major depression and twice as likely to have PTSD.

Over-diagnosis of bipolar disorder is concerning, in part, because it is typically treated with mood-stabilising drugs that can affect the kidneys, liver, and metabolic and immune systems, explained lead researcher Dr Mark Zimmerman, an associate professor at Brown and director of outpatient psychiatry at Rhode Island Hospital.

In addition, over-diagnosis can mean some patients not getting the appropriate care.

Africa

Tough love for Africa – from the USA

Hillary Clinton has set a new tone in US relations with Africa on a whirlwind 7-nation trip, sometimes ruffling feathers with a tough love message that Africans must tackle their own problems. On her longest trip yet as Secretary of State, Clinton crisscrossed the continent for 11 days from an AIDS clinic in rural South Africa to the war zone of the Democratic Republic of Congo to a round-table with Nigerian faith leaders. To the diverse audiences, Clinton delivered a consistent message: the fate of Africa is up to the Africans, and the USA, while ready to work with them, has no 'magic wand' to solve endemic problems. Clinton said during a news conference with Cape Verde's Prime Minister Jose Maria Neves that 'the Obama administration both in the president's speech in Ghana and in my visit, have given a message of tough love. We are not sugarcoating the problems, we are not shying away from them, our emphasis is to help to channel the hopes and aspirations of the people of Africa, in a way that changes the direction of their countries.' Kenya's Prime Minister, Raila Odinga, bristled at US 'lecturing', although a US official dismissed his remarks as public posturing. Tom Wheeler, research associate at the South African Institute of International Affairs, said that the new US administration has produced 'a shift in style and substance' with Africa. 'Africans have always expected countries outside the continent to solve their problems, while simultaneously resenting that aid dependency,' he said.

Clinton pointed to India as proof that democracy works in developing countries and hailing Botswana for ensuring its mineral wealth funds a first-class infrastructure. She came with no major funding promises although she stepped up money to fight AIDS in Angola and to help stop a rape epidemic in Congo. The Obama administration's signature initiative for Africa was a \$20 billion (R161 billion) plan by the Group of Eight rich nations to boost agriculture and let Africans end their own hunger problems rather than rely on aid.

Rape 'is a weapon of war in Africa'

Hundreds of thousands of women, girls and babies have been raped during 12 years of conflict in eastern Congo, victims of a weapon of war that almost always goes unpunished, an expert told US senators last month. Similar atrocities have occurred in Darfur, the devastated western Sudan region where the USA said in 2004 that genocide was occurring. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee heard testimony on the plight of women caught up in violence, emphasising the Darfur and Congo disasters.

Melanne Verveer, the State Department's ambassador-at-large for global women's issues, said 1 100 rapes are reported every month in the Congo battle area, 'which is 36 women and girls raped each day'. Many are maimed by their attackers as well, she said. 'Rape is employed as a weapon because it is effective, breaking apart families and communities more efficiently than do guns or bombs. 'In addition to these rapes and gang rapes, of which there have been hundreds of thousands over the duration of the conflict, the perpetrators frequently mutilate the woman in the course of the attack,' she said. The apparent purpose is to leave a lasting and inerasable signal to others, giving the victim 'a lifelong badge of shame'. If married, she often is cast aside. If unmarried, she cannot find a mate. 'Few cases are reported to the police, and fewer still are in prosecution. Of the 14 000 rape cases registered in the provincial health centres in (Congo) between 2005 and 2007, only 287 were ever taken to trial.' Verveer said Susan Rice, US ambassador to the UN, plans to visit Africa with representatives of the UN Security Council. One of their visits, Verveer said, will be to a hospital in the eastern Congo, where

one of only two doctors in the region is capable of the kind of surgery needed to rehabilitate women and girls whose organs are maimed by their attackers.

South Africa

OSD settlement – a flicker of hope for mid-level doctors?

Mid-level-category public sector doctors, least rewarded in the Occupation Specific Dispensation (OSD) settlement (of 7 August), will have to wait another eight months to see whether negotiations to be re-opened for them will sweeten their packages.

This is the outcome of the South African Medical Association (SAMA) and its five partner unions conditionally agreeing to sign the employer's 30 June OSD offer.

The offer benefits juniors and top seniors most, leaving slimmer pickings for mid-level doctors.

Juniors (mostly) took to the streets in unprecedented numbers as doctor-state relations reached an all-time low, with on-off punitive State measures and Health Professions Council censure. Controversy over patient care and the government refusing to sign a minimum service level with emergency services raged back and forth.

In terms of the agreement, SAMA accepted what was tabled, on condition that once non-OSD public sector wage negotiations (to follow) are concluded, the employer re-opens unique, category-specific talks on mid-level OSD packages. The Health Department gave a signed undertaking that any further increases agreed to for mid-level doctors (junior and senior specialists, chief medical officers and clinical managers) will be implemented from 1 April 2010.

Thembi Gumbi, SAMA's labour relations chief, said one consequence of rejecting the employer's OSD counter-proposal would have been to leave the baseline for the upcoming annual public sector salary adjustments (backdated to July this year) far lower, costing doctors dearly.

Swine flu tests strain hospitals

The Department of Health has pleaded with people who believe they are suffering from swine flu to stop swamping state hospitals and clinics because 'unnecessary' testing is putting the facilities under huge strain. Department spokesman Fidel Hadebe asked those with 'mild' symptoms to stay

at home, saying only those with 'severe' symptoms should seek medical attention. 'Unless you are very sick and show the symptoms of swine flu, don't go for testing. Pregnant women must be tested when they feel sick and show symptoms,' he said. 'The reason why we say people must not panic is not because we don't acknowledge swine flu, but to avoid people flooding the hospitals and testing unnecessarily.' Hadebe said Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi acknowledged that there had been a 'huge increase' in the number of people being tested for swine flu when it was 'unnecessary'. Eastern Cape health spokesman Sizwe Kupelo said the province's resources were overstretched because schools were reporting seasonal flu cases to hospitals and clinics every day. Nombuso Shabalala, spokeswoman for the National Institute for Communicable Disease, said only people with moderate or severe flu symptoms should be tested, including those exhibiting symptoms of pneumonia. 'We encourage people with HIV/AIDS, pregnant women and those with chronic medical conditions, when they show moderate or severe flu symptoms to test immediately,' she said. 'Most people who go for testing have normal symptoms and we don't encourage testing for them.' By 17 August the number of confirmed swine flu cases in South Africa was 3 485 and 6 South Africans had died of the disease. Hadebe said Health Minister Motsoaledi would appear in advertisements, 'telling the nation what the government is doing to respond to the virus, explaining what swine flu is and giving basic information about dealing with it'.

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