

News Bites

International

Ex-food and drug chief gets death penalty

China's former top drug regulator has been sentenced to death in an unusually harsh punishment for taking bribes to approve substandard medicines, including an antibiotic blamed for at least 30 deaths. Seeking to address broadening concerns over foods, the government also announced plans for its first recall system for unsafe products. The developments are among the most dramatic steps Beijing has taken to address domestic and international alarm over shoddy and unsafe Chinese goods – from pet food ingredients and toothpaste mixed with industrial chemicals to tainted antibiotics.

Design-a-baby technology is here

In a world-first, British IVF doctors are genetically screening embryos for a couple to ensure that any baby they have will not inherit a squint. If screening shows that the child will be born with visual problems, the embryo will be destroyed and a healthier one implanted into the mother-to-be's womb. Critics say the use of screening for an essentially cosmetic problem is another step toward the creation of perfect 'designer' babies made to order by characteristics as trivial as eye colour or hair colour.

Spring babies not so clever, study shows

Babies born in spring could be less intelligent because of the effect of pesticides, doctors in Britain have warned. A study of more than 1.5 million children suggested that those conceived in the summer, when pesticide use is at its highest, are less clever than other youngsters. Researcher Dr Paul Winchester of Indiana University School of Medicine, said: 'The foetal brain begins developing soon after conception. The pesticides we use in fields and our homes and the nitrates we use to fertilise our crops and even our lawns are at their highest level in summer.' (*Pretoria News* 9/05)

Cord blood banking a booming business in USA

A growing number of Americans now opt to bank their cord blood at own expense, cryopreserving it at a private US facility for the family's exclusive use in the event of an unforeseen medical emergency. Cord blood is a rich source of stem cells, a type of

cell that can morph into almost any tissue type in the body and replicate. Researchers are studying how to use these cells to grow new tissue to treat everything from brain and spinal cord injuries to heart disease, diabetes, stroke and Parkinson's disease.

Breakthrough for ALS sufferers

Researchers have developed the first antibody that detects the only known cause of the fatal nervous disorder LAS, or Lou Gehrig disease. It identifies 'misfolded' mutations in the enzyme superoxide-dismutase-1 (SOD1), which cause about 1 - 2% of all cases of ALS. The antibody could eventually help to diagnose the disease earlier and find ways to immunise against it, researchers at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Medicine said.

Money problems when man hears he will not die

A man who blew all his savings after he heard he only had 6 months to live, has submitted a claim after doctors in Britain admitted that their diagnosis was incorrect. John Brandrick (62) was informed 2 years ago that he has incurable cancer in his pancreas. He then decided to spend his remaining time on earth in style. He resigned from his job and spent all his money on hotels, restaurants and holidays. Doctors revised their diagnosis after a year and found that he suffers from a glandular condition, which is not deadly at all. Brandrick does not want to take the hospital to court, but states that they have to at least compensate him. The hospital states that there is no proof that there was any negligence on their side.

Kidney donor show 'a macabre, tasteless and unethical game'

As the European Union's health chief, Markos Kyprianou comes across many unsavoury situations. However, little prepared him for Dutch television's *Big Donor Show*, which had three contestants vying for the kidney of a terminally ill woman. 'I have to say I was shocked by this idea. And I am not shocked easily,' Kyprianou said during the presentation of his proposal to increase organ donations and transplants in the 27-nation EU. But as he was seeking to highlight the issue of organ donation and persuade more people to become donors, the show could not have given Kyprianou more publicity.

Africa

Donors chide Moz over HIV

Mozambique's biggest donor in the fight against HIV/AIDS is not satisfied with the country's current efforts to tackle the pandemic. Jay Knott from the US International Aid Development agency said the financial resources the central government had set aside for the fight against the pandemic were meagre, compared with the challenges. Mozambique's infection rate is pegged at more than 16% between the ages of 16 and 49, which represents the country's productive population.

Women's perceived inferiority helping to fuel AIDS

Cultural beliefs that women are inferior to men are spurring the rapid spread of HIV in Swaziland and Botswana, the countries most affected by AIDS, according to a report released last month by Physicians for Human Rights. It states that women's dependency on their male partners makes them more vulnerable to the disease in countries which, it says, have questionable human rights. Women have no control over sexual decisions, including using a condom, and fear that testing positive would jeopardise their relationships and lead to their being stigmatised and shunned by society.

HIV/ AIDS barometer

AIDS-related deaths in South Africa: 2 120 225 at noon on 2 May 2007. Urgent action by African leaders is needed if they are to make good on commitments to roll back the AIDS pandemic. Speakers at this week's Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS and Health Research Alliance (Sahara) conference, 'Innovations in access to prevent, treatment and care in HIV/AIDS', in Kenya's western city of Kisumu, said political commitment to combat AIDS must be accompanied by adequate funding for intervention programmes, as well as strategic partnerships with NGOs, researchers, the private sector and people infected by HIV.

South Africa

Brain drain hampers battle against AIDS

An exodus of health care workers to private clinics or abroad is severely undermining AIDS programmes in southern Africa, according to the charity Doctors Without

Borders (*Médecins sans Frontières* (MSF)). 'More pills, more infrastructure will not improve the situation. We have another bottleneck and this bottleneck is health staff,' Dr Eric Goemaere, head of MSF South Africa, said recently when presenting a report in Cape Town. The report painted a bleak picture of the situation in South Africa, Lesotho, Malawi and Mozambique. With clinics saturated and nearly a million AIDS patients receiving no treatment, radical policy shifts were needed to enable nurses to initiate antiretroviral (ARV) treatment, Goemaere said.

Business will fund plan

The price tag placed on the National Strategic Plan (NSP) for HIV/ AIDS will be R45 billion for the next 3 years. But business has little choice but to shoulder some of the burden of funding the implementation of this plan, Brad Mears, chief executive of the South African Business Coalition on HIV and AIDS told a workshop of delegates in Pretoria this week. According to current projections, an estimated 10 - 40 % of South Africa's workforce will become infected unless the tide turns, attendees of the workshop heard.

New law will say no payment to surrogate mothers

There is a serious shortage of surrogate mothers in South Africa and the new Children's Act – which is being implemented at this stage – will worsen this shortage. This is the opinion of Dr Igno Siebert of the Institute of Reproductive Medicines at Tygerberg and Vincent Palotti hospitals. 'In terms of the new Children's Act, surrogate mothers may not receive any financial incentive for their services and this will surely worsen the shortage,' Siebert warned. Mrs Judith Cohen of the Human Rights Commission confirmed that the mother may be reimbursed for any medical costs she had to incur during the pregnancy. According to the new Act, only a court can decide if someone may act as a surrogate mother.

Babies receive best treatment in South Africa

Babies who are born early in South African private hospitals have a bigger chance at survival and are going home earlier than babies born early elsewhere in the world. This was the finding of the International Vermont Oxford Neonatal Network (VON), where 13 neonatal intensive care units (NICU) form part of the Netcare hospital group. A total of 560 NICU in North America, Canada, Europe, Asia and the Middle East belong to this group specifically to exchange statistical duties.

Allowances keep doctors out of public service

The South African public health care sector has a personnel shortage of about 30%, 'but it could be worse'. Dr Yogan Pillay, head of strategic planning in the Department of Health and Mr Gert Muller, the financial head, told the Health Portfolio Committee of Parliament last month that the shortage of health care personnel had a huge impact on service delivery. According to Pillay most of the vacant positions are technical by nature. 'This includes medical specialists who just would not work in the public sector. The reason for this are the scarce and rural allowances which they receive in the private sector,' said Pillay. Specialists do not receive these allowances in the public sector and Pillay said government could not pay them what they receive in the private sector.

Nursing Council crisis as officials square up

The SA Nursing Council is in such a shambles that its deputy registrar wouldn't think twice about firing all 142 employees and council members if given the permission. A KPMG audit report had found that the council was tasked with protecting the public against unfair nursing practices by regulating the profession, but was susceptible to widespread fraud, theft and misappropriation of funds, administrative discrepancies and non-compliance with accounting principles, tax laws and its own policies. The report, completed in March last year, found senior staff members approved salary increases without proper authorisation and that there were many administrative 'risks' which could have led to fraud, corruption and theft of council assets. The SANC deputy registrar for corporate affairs, Herman Dikobe, joined the council in August and placed the blame for the council's problems squarely on the shoulders of former registrar Hasina Subedar and senior council members, for allowing the rot to set in.

Cabinet backs latest AIDS plan

Cabinet has approved the country's revamped HIV/ AIDS plan, which aims to reduce new infections by 50% by 2011. The newly constituted SA National AIDS Council will co-ordinate all efforts in the renewed national partnership against HIV/ AIDS government, spokesman Themba Maseko said after the last Cabinet meeting in Pretoria. In addition to its primary goal of reducing new infection by 50% over the next 5 years, the plan also makes provision for treatment, care and support services.

North West 'allays' fears on HIV/ AIDS

The North West health department has disputed a claim by a local councillor that 70% of Tlokweg residents, near Rustenburg, are HIV positive. In a statement, departmental spokesman Lwandile Sicwetsha said: 'It is not correct that Bojanala district in North West is the hardest hit by HIV and AIDS in the province and that 70% of Tlokweg residents are HIV positive.' He was reacting to a statement by Ward 21 councillor Siphosiso Vava, in an interview with *Sowetan* last week. 'The department has never released any information regarding the pandemic in the district.' (*sic*) Sicwetsha said the department wanted to allay the fears of the Tlokweg and Bojanala communities.


Note: *Izindaba* established late last year that HIV prevalence at antenatal clinics in the nearby Boitekong township outside Rustenburg, whose main breadwinners also work on the nearby platinum mines, stood at 48%.

AIDS drive gets a new life

The government has relaunched its flagship HIV/AIDS communications campaign, Khomanani, ending almost a year of uncertainty about its future after the health department let its contracts with service providers Johnnic Communications and the Meropa Communications Consortium expire last July. The health department announced that it had awarded a new R190 million 2-year Khomanani tender to a consortium of four companies: accounting firm Sizwe-Ntsaluba VSP, management consultants Sadmon Projects and Consulting, media company Izwi Multimedia, and advertising firm TBWA Hunt Lascaris. Khomanani's five communication themes are: HIV/ AIDS prevention; care, treatment and support; nutrition and HIV/ AIDS; health promotion; and TB and HIV.

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