

International

Nobel scientist discovers a 'basis' for homoeopathy

At a time when the British Medical Association is calling for the end of national funding for homoeopathy and detractors are describing it as 'nonsense on stilts', Nobel prize-winning scientist and HIV discoverer, Professor Luc Montagnier, is suggesting homoeopathy actually has a scientific basis. The French virologist this July shocked fellow Nobel prize winners and the medical establishment by telling them that he had discovered that water has a memory that continues even after many dilutions. Until Montagnier's research, the bulk of mainstream doctors and scientists had maintained that there was no scientific way that multiple dilutions used in homoeopathy could possibly work. Homoeopathy protagonists claim that such views stem mostly from a desire to stem the rising popularity of homoeopathy and eliminate it as a competition to mainstream medicine – much the same as happened in the USA a century ago. One of the foundations of homoeopathy is that the potency of a substance is increased with its dilution. Montagnier says he has found that solutions containing the DNA of viruses and bacteria 'could emit low-frequency radio waves' and that such waves influence molecules around them, turning them into organised structures. The molecules in turn emit waves and Montagnier says that the waves remain in the water even after it has been diluted many times. To a lay person, that may mean little, but homoeopathy proponents say that this strongly suggests that homoeopathy has a scientific basis.

Africa

Non-communicable diseases increasing

Unless critical changes are introduced soon, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) could increase by a further 19% in developing countries by 2015 with the greatest increases in Africa, where it is anticipated they will rise by 24%. This warning came from South Africa's health minister, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, at the Diabetes Leadership Forum held in Sandton at the end of September. Motsoaledi said this was a clarion call to action, especially because the situation had to be superimposed onto the many other health problems experienced globally. 'We run the risk of compartmentalising both our thinking and our interventions to the detriment of the health status of our populations,' he said. 'We have not been able to give the attention and resources that we may otherwise have been able to give to this important set of health conditions,' he concluded. NCDs account for 59% of global deaths and 46% of the global burden of disease. Eighty per cent of the burden occurs in low- and middle-income countries. In

low- and middle-income countries 8 million people die prematurely (under 60 years of age) annually from preventable causes. Currently more than 70% of people with diabetes live in such countries.

South Africa

New Western Cape health complaints commission opens nomination process

The Western Cape health department has started inviting nominations for experts and community members to serve on an independent complaints commission (ICC). MEC Theuns Botha announced that the commission would be established before year end to investigate complaints by patients using state health care facilities in the province. People who feel aggrieved will be able to request an investigation by the ICC only once they have exhausted all internal complaints procedures. Botha said the commission will help them step up service delivery. 'The establishment of the commission is an acknowledgement that, although there are existing channels in the department for dissatisfied clients to seek redress, these do not always meet the expectations of an independent assessment,' he added. Provincial health department head, Craig Househam, said it was a big step towards enforcing accountability at the provinces' hospitals and clinics.

Rabies outbreak claims two lives in KZN

The KwaZulu-Natal government is concerned about the spread of rabies in the province where two people have died from the disease – one on the south coast and one on the north coast – since April this year. About 147 dogs died of rabies during the same period. The manager for Veterinary Services, Dumisani Mtshali, says the agricultural department is doing its utmost to contain the spread of the disease. 'We are still appealing to pet owners to bring their animals to our vaccination points whenever we make a call. The vaccines are free and they do not interfere with the hunting ability of their dogs,' says Mtshali.

There was also a rabies outbreak among dogs in the greater Johannesburg area in early September. A young Johannesburg girl died, possibly after contracting rabies, Gauteng Agriculture and Rural Development MEC Nandi Mayathula-Khoza said. The child, aged under 10, from Dobsonville, Soweto, died at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital after being scratched by an unvaccinated domestic puppy. She displayed symptoms similar to those of rabies. Already 9 human cases that resulted in death have been confirmed in South Africa this year: three in the Eastern Cape, two in KwaZulu-Natal, one in Mpumalanga and three in Limpopo. Professor Lucille Blumberg of the National

Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) says her institution deals with up to 20 cases of human rabies per year. Her advice is that once a person is bitten by a stray animal, they should immediately do the following three things: 'Wash the wound very well, so you physically remove the virus. You can wash with whatever is available – any soap. Second thing is, if there is break in the skin, like blood, you have to go to the clinic and get concentrated antibodies. It will neutralise the virus once injected into the wound. Thirdly, you get a course of rabies vaccine from a clinic that will stimulate your own immune system to produce anti-rabies virus antibodies,' she said. For communities without access to a health facility, the washing of the wound is extremely important, she added.

Johannesburg pet owners have been urged to get their animals vaccinated against rabies after the outbreak in the southern and western parts of the city. The government will be going to different areas to administer the vaccine free of charge. State veterinarian Michael de Buda said they would start at the Moletsane Recreation Centre and the Naledi Hall in Soweto.

MEC warns dodging doctors

Doctors who ditch their public hospital patients to attend to private clients were given a stern warning by Gauteng Health MEC Qedani Mahlangu, in her latest broadside at health care practitioners in her employ last month. Speaking at a provincial consultative forum at Turffontein Race Course in Johannesburg, she vowed that she would get to the defaulting doctors 'one by one'. Mahlangu said she did not want to have to answer questions such as: 'Why does the CEO of Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital (Barney Selebano) allow professor so and so to go and do surgery at Milpark private hospital at 10 o'clock in the morning?' Mahlangu said she also found it 'totally unacceptable' for doctors not to do Sunday ward rounds. Instead of attending to patients on a Sunday, doctors would go for lunch or not pitch at all. 'I've got so many doctors on the payroll but they're not there, they're not working, they're not doing their rounds,' she said. The forum also discussed a draft Service Transformation Plan that aims to build new district hospitals in Daveyton, Diepsloot, Zola and Soshanguve. The plan suggests that one health clinic in each sub-district operates 24 hours a day. Mahlangu said this was based upon a Brazilian health care model.

Mahlangu's history of comments about public service doctors has not endeared her to a vital component of her department's service delivery. Earlier this year she claimed to have evidence of widespread fraud and corruption by health care workers, including surgeons

allegedly conducting 'pirate' surgery. An in-depth investigation by the Hawks into the 'haemorrhaging' of public funds in her department is expected soon.

Man threatens to shoot nurses over HIV

Nurses fled from a rural clinic in the Flagstaff area of Transkei after the boyfriend of an HIV-positive woman threatened to shoot them, the Eastern Cape health department confirmed last month. Spokesperson Sizwe Kupelo said the woman, who had previously tested positive, went for another test at the clinic, with the same result. Her boyfriend later went to the clinic and threatened to shoot the nurses. 'It had to close because the nurses ran away,' Kupelo said. He added that it was possible that the woman went for re-testing because she had been told by a sangoma that her disease was cured.

Department says no more payment 'glitches' at Alex clinic

The Gauteng health department admitted last month that lessons 'were learnt' from the narrowly avoided strike at the Alexandra Health Centre and that funding problems 'must end'. Doctors and nurses at the northern Johannesburg clinic stopped working when their September salaries were not paid. Hundreds of patients were turned away while negotiations continued and salaries were finally paid several days late. The clinic relies almost exclusively on funding from the department and was waiting for around R11 million to clear. The clinic operates on around R50 million a year from private donations and state coffers. The department's Mandla Sidu said 'a glitch' caused the payment problems. 'These people have been paid and we know that there was a delay and we will make sure that going forward they are one of our priorities,' promised Sidu.

He said an investigation is underway to determine what caused the problem. The primary health care facility treats between 800 and 1 000 people per day.

SA facing water pollution crisis

By 2015, 80% of South Africa's fresh water resources will be so badly polluted that no process of purification available in the country will be able to make it fit for human or animal consumption, the Environment and Conservation Association said last month. 'If we do not find a completely new source of water altogether in about two years, most of Gauteng will be without safe drinking water.' The impending disaster that would be created by acid mine drainage as well as sewerage and industrial pollution had on many occasions been brought to the attention of the government, with no positive results, the Association said.

The Association would embark on a massive water-monitoring project where it would roll out water testing and monitoring in the six major water catchments in Gauteng and Limpopo to produce independent and accurate results of exactly how bad the country's water was.

Body welcomes upgrade of hospitals

The government's plan to upgrade public hospitals was welcomed last month by the South African Medical Association (SAMA), who called it a good way to restore public confidence. 'Such revitalisation will go a long way towards addressing the dismal state we find in our public institutions. We hope this will also address the issues of shortage of equipment and lack of other resources in our public institutions,' said SAMA spokesperson Phophi Ramathuba. 'It's a good initiative to restore confidence of the people in our public institutions.'

Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi earlier announced that the country would spend billions to improve health care by renovating dilapidated hospitals. This forms part of the 10-point plan to re-engineer the public sector in preparation for the National Health Insurance system.

Five of these hospitals include Durban's King Edward VIII, Nelson Mandela Academic in the Eastern Cape, Dr George Mukhari and Chris Hani Baragwanath hospitals in Gauteng and the Limpopo Academic Hospital.

Anglo wins mental health care award

The Anglo American Chairman's Fund was recognised with a special service award for its ongoing contribution towards the upliftment of mental health care in South Africa. Presented by the SA Federation for Mental Health (SAFMH) at the Kopanong Conference Centre in Benoni, Johannesburg, the award is recognition for the corporate social investment leader's commitment to uplifting the lives and respecting the rights of people living with psychiatric and intellectual disability.

Remarking after the announcement, Cape Mental Health Society Head of Donor Development, Gwynne Main, said, 'We truly believe that the Anglo American Chairman's Fund deserves to be honoured for its sustained contribution to people living with mental health disabilities and for its significant support and creative engagement with the non-profit sector as a whole. The Anglo American Chairman's Fund was nominated for this prestigious award by three mental health societies in South Africa.'

CHRIS BATEMAN

SINGLE SUTURE

Polio crisis

The world financial crisis could upset the 22-year battle to eradicate polio, just as victory is in sight. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), based in Geneva, has recently announced that it is short of a third of the \$2.6 billion it needs this year, due to financial cut-backs in the countries funding the programme.

The donor countries contribute to polio eradication from funds not tied to regular aid budgets. These are the first to go in a crisis.

Unless the money is found very soon, the GPEI will have to cut back in countries that have eliminated polio but are at risk of reinfection without continued vaccination and surveillance.

The programme has made progress in much of the world, partly owing to a re-designed vaccine that immunises against the two most common strains of the virus, rather than against all three as it used to, focusing immunity where it is needed.

India has slashed cases by 88% so far this year. In Nigeria cases have fallen by 99% as Muslim leaders, once against vaccination, now support it. Mass vaccination seems to have stopped a resurgence of the waterborne virus in flooded Pakistan.

Yet in Tajikistan, which eliminated polio in 1997, an outbreak in April paralysed more than 400 children. The GPEI has also announced that polio is re-established in the eastern DRC. Both areas were highlighted as risk last year because of low vaccination rates.

New Scientist, 18 September 2010.