

News bites

South Africa

MCC's gross failure to protect-DA

The R18bn alternative medicines industry is poorly regulated by Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang and the Medicines Control Council (MCC), leaving consumers unprotected, Democratic Alliance (DA) health spokesman Mike Waters claimed. Most of these medicines were believed not to have been tested or granted approval by the council to be sold on the South African market, which meant there was no knowledge of whether they had any side-effects on certain groups of people with the serious illnesses they claimed to cure.

Your country needs you

We need you! Come home! This is the urgent cry from South Africa to its teachers and nurses scattered around the globe as the skills crisis assumes unprecedented levels with estimated staff shortages hitting the 70 000 mark in classrooms and hospitals. The Department of Health and Netcare have confirmed that there are at least 28 000 - 30 000 nursing vacancies in the public sector and another 5 000 in the private sector. Netcare nursing director Eileen Brannigan said South Africa ideally needs another 35 000 nurses but is producing only between 2 500 and 3 000 registered nurses a year.

Hospital to get huge cash injection

The Health Department says the Eastern Cape's Frere Hospital maintenance budget must be increased from R3.5 million to R35 million, or 5% of the hospital's total budget. This forms part of recommendations made by a task team appointed to investigate the hospital after 43 babies died at there in June. A total of 2 000 babies were stillborn in the past 14 years at Frere, according to the 'abortions and stillbirth book' in the labour ward. The team's investigation found that the maternity unit, neonatal unit and neonatal ICU were understaffed. During an unannounced visit to one 32-bed ward, it was found that only one professional nurse and one nursing assistant were on duty that day. There is also an urgent need to increase the number of porters, messengers, general assistants and clerical staff.

R25m – the cost of saving lives in the strike

The government will have to fork out R24.9 million to private hospitals who took in state patients during the recent public-sector strike. And in a bitter twist, one of the unions representing nurses who went on strike says the money could have been better spent. The Health Department announced that it would have to pay R24.9 million to private hospitals and clinics who took in patients that could not be accommodated at public facilities during the 4-week strike, which started on 25 June. SA Democratic Nurses' Union general secretary Moeketsi Mohai said: 'The money could have been used to shape up the department's failing service delivery had government's attitude towards the wage negotiations been right. We as unions were not crazy about the strike, but were forced (to strike) by government.'

Health 'is government priority'

The private health care industry may want to learn a lesson from the fate of the retirement industry, which faces the threat of losing 6% of its membership under proposed government reform. Lately, government has been sounding the alarm about private health care, complaining about high costs and membership stagnation. Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang believes private health care is too expensive and not adequately monitored. Speaking at the annual Board of Healthcare Funders (BHF) conference at Sun City, Tshabalala-Msimang criticised private health care for its persistent above-inflation price increases, and its failure to implement quality assurance systems to monitor health outcomes.

Sangoma makes a killing at court

A Durban sangoma who frequents the Durban magistrate's court has been raking in thousands of rands by claiming to be able to influence the outcome of court cases. The cases she has dealt with include murder, armed robbery and rape. In an interview sangoma Lungisile Nzimakwe (38) said she could give accused people *muti* to have their cases thrown out. It was important for the accused to tell her exactly what happened so she could prescribe the right *muti* to guarantee a favourable outcome, she said. Asked if

she believed it was fair to help murderers, armed robbers and rapists to get away scot-free after committing such serious crimes, Nzimakwe back-tracked and said she would only help people who were falsely accused.

Workplaces a breeding ground for death and disease

The lives of thousands of South Africans are being harmed or cut short every year because of dusty, poisonous or otherwise unhealthy workplaces, yet very little is being done to investigate or remedy the problem. 'It is backwards and barbarous that so many deaths and sicknesses simply go unnoticed by our legal system,' said specialist attorney Rodney Spoor. He had been involved in several legal battles to hold industries accountable for occupational injuries and diseases. David Rees, Wits Professor of Occupational Health and a senior member of the National Institute for Occupational Health, said the problem was grossly under-reported because South Africa did not have an official register of occupational disease.

Lives at risk as mines coin it

Gold mines on the Witwatersrand are exposing millions of people in Gauteng and North West to poisoned water, leaving a trail of suspected cancer, kidney disease and death. No one can put a figure to the devastation because officials have refused to heed calls for an epidemiological study to determine the extent of the catastrophe, say researchers and environmental groups monitoring the disaster. National, provincial and local officials have known since the 1960s that citizens would be exposed to the witch's brew of toxic chemicals that current and closed mines spew as waste into our waterways every single day. The poor, the old, the young, and especially those infected with HIV are most at risk. The cocktail includes heavy metals and chemicals that cause cancer and mental retardation, destroy the kidneys and can even poison victims outright.

Addiction to over-the-counter drugs rife

Tens of thousands of 'ordinary' South Africans are addicted to over-the-counter painkillers and sedatives like Codis, Stopayne, Nurofen-Plus and Valium. This is according to the latest research by the

Medical Research Council (MRC) among 73 drug treatment centres countrywide. It was conducted over the second half of last year. It shows that 5 - 8% of their patients are abusing analgesics (codeine-based painkillers) or benzodiazepines (prescribed tranquilisers like Valium, Librium, Rohypnol or Ativan). There are a slew of other serious symptoms of over-the-counter drug addiction, aside from liver and kidney dysfunction. Gastrointestinal disorders, gallstones, chronic constipation, depression and constant headaches are also among the risks. Alarming, withdrawing from these drugs can be deadly.

Africa

Malawi urges national AIDS test

Malawi's government is calling on all sexually active people in the country to take an AIDS test. About 14% of Malawi's 12 million people are believed to be HIV positive, but more accurate figures would help planning and enable people to get treatment. The campaign will focus on rural areas that are usually beyond the reach of the state's health services and the health ministry has distributed 300 000 testing kits around the country to cope with the expected demand.

Less risk of AIDS infection when times are tight

It's not only the prices of bread and eggs that are out of control in Zimbabwe, land of 4 000% inflation. For the man inclined to cheat on his wife, these are trying times. Keeping a mistress, visiting a prostitute or even taking a girlfriend out for beers is simply becoming too expensive, men say. But their strain is Zimbabwe's gain in its fight against AIDS. Alone among southern African countries, Zimbabwe has shown a significant drop in its HIV rate in recent years. A major reason, researchers say, is the changing of sexual habits of men forced to abandon costly multiple relationships.

Case against Pfizer revised

The Nigerian government would re-file an amended suit seeking \$6.5 billion (R44.7 billion) in damages from US drug company Pfizer over tests conducted on children, lawyers said. The case centres on 200 children given drugs during a meningitis outbreak in 1995, including Pfizer's antibiotic Trovan. Nigerian authorities say Pfizer deceived them about the details of the tests, and caused the deaths of 11 children. Apart from the children who died, others suffered varying degrees

of 'deafness, muteness, paralysis, brain damage, loss of sight and slurred speech', the suit says. The Kano state government is also suing Pfizer, seeking damages of \$2 billion, and has pressed criminal charges. Both the civil and criminal cases, bogged down by technicalities, have been adjourned.

International

Tainted Chinese food sparks panic

Around the world, agricultural and consumer organisations are concerned at the impact of substandard goods and toxic food imported from China. South Africa hasn't been left unscathed: the pineapple industry is on its knees after contaminated fertiliser was used; the pet food scare earlier this year cost the country R160 million; and Chinese honey with high levels of antibiotics caused a health scare. Last month, in a damage control exercise to protect 'Brand China', the former Chinese drug and food safety chief was executed after he was convicted of taking bribes to approve fake medicines. All over the world, countries are clamping down on imports from China, and in South Africa agricultural unions and consumer associations are calling on the government to introduce stricter measures against contaminated imports and to update and enforce legislation to protect consumers.

HIV expert calls for new child TB policy

One of SA's leading HIV researchers has urged the Health Department to consider revising its childhood vaccination policy for tuberculosis (TB) in the wake of a warning from the World Health Organization (WHO). The WHO last November highlighted concerns that the vaccine itself could cause infections in babies with immune systems already weakened by HIV. The warning poses a direct challenge for SA, which has limited resources for diagnosing HIV-positive babies at birth yet routinely provides all newborns with the bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine to protect them against TB.

SA 'spurns World Bank's AIDS money'

The World Bank's HIV/AIDS programme director Dr Debrework Zewdie last month expressed disappointment at the South African government's continued refusal of the financial institution's offer to help

combat the country's HIV epidemic, one of the world's worst. SA has at least 5.5 million HIV-infected people, according to the government's own estimates. When SA's new R45bn National Strategic AIDS Plan was launched this year, Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said the government would be hard pressed to bankroll the entire plan itself and called on the private sector to help. Zewdie said she had personally been involved in efforts to help the government but had been repeatedly rebuffed. 'SA doesn't want the World Bank's money. We actually lost a lot of money in trying to entice SA to take money from the World Bank.'

New drugs hint at end to era of AIDS

A new generation of HIV drugs is so promising that researchers are talking about eradicating the virus, an international AIDS conference was told in Sydney. The International AIDS Society (IAS) conference from 22 to 25 July brought together more than 5 000 experts from around the world to hear presentations on the cutting edge of HIV/AIDS research. Conference co-chairman David Cooper said some of the most exciting research developments came from a new generation of drugs called integrase inhibitors, which help block the HI virus from infecting new cells. Cooper said up to 30 drugs were now available to HIV patients in the developed world, meaning they live longer, but present a challenge to the health systems which treat them because they are more prone to conditions such as heart disease and cancer.

Call for child-specific AIDS drugs

The world's biggest AIDS conference closed with a call for the development of child-specific drugs to ensure millions of HIV-infected children not only survive to adulthood, but also live without damaging side-effects from treatment. 'The goal of treatment in children must be balanced between halting the effects of the HIV disease and the long-term effects of antiretrovirals on a developing child,' said Dr Anette Sohn, of the Division of Paediatric Infectious Diseases at the University of California. Sohn said HIV-infected children on antiretrovirals risked HIV encephalopathy, where the brain swells and damages tissue over time, reduced neurocognitive development, and lower bone density.

CHRIS BATEMAN