

News bites

South Africa

SAMA backs fired doctors

It was ethical for a doctor to 'blow the whistle' and expose conditions at Frere Hospital in East London, the South African Medical Association (SAMA) said. Professor Denise White, acting chairwoman of SAMA, said investigations were needed to establish whether or not the rights of patients had been further violated by the suspension from duty of two doctors.

'Saving babies' report calls for action

Half of the almost 1 600 children who died in 15 hospitals in 2005 were clinically eligible for antiretroviral medication, yet only 3% – a total of 48 children – were on ARVs. Almost half had never been tested for HIV and only 7% of dead children's mothers were known to have been given the antiretroviral drug nevirapine to prevent HIV-positive mothers from infecting their babies. These are some of the findings of the report *Saving Babies 2005*, compiled by the Medical Research Council, based on information supplied by 15 hospitals in 6 provinces over a period of 5 months. The low rate of HIV testing, as well as the poor reach of the prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) and antiretroviral programmes, represents 'missed opportunities for improving the care of children in South Africa,' writes Dr Neil McKerrow, a specialist paediatrician in the KwaZulu-Natal Health Department.

Huge claim after their baby gets HIV

What should have been a period of healing after a small operation in a hospital in Soweto, ended up in a nightmare for the father of a 3-year-old boy when it was established that the latter was most probably contaminated with the HI virus at this hospital. Themba's parents are currently claiming approximately R5 million from the Gauteng MEC for health, the Chris Hani-Baragwanath Hospital and the South African National Blood Services for alleged neglect that has changed their son's life forever. 'Even if we win the case, it will never give my son's life back to him,' said Themba's emotional father. According to the application that was lodged in the Johannesburg High Court, the 4-week-old Themba was admitted to the Chris Hani-Baragwanath Hospital on 27 January 2004 with an HIV-negative status – for

treatment of an intestinal disease. He was operated on and also received a blood transfusion. Since the operation, Themba kept on losing weight – so much that his desperate father eventually took him to a doctor, who tested Themba for HIV and found he was positive.

Sacking elicits wide censure

Thabo Mbeki's dismissal of the deputy health minister has earned him swift condemnation, both internationally and at home, with *The New York Times* warning that unless the president 'finally starts listening to sensible advice on AIDS, he will leave a tragic legacy of junk science and unnecessary death'. A British medical journal, *The Lancet*, said that of the 'many injustices' relating to the dismissal, the most concerning was that 'Mbeki has put a question mark over his government's commitment to the AIDS treatment plan that Madlala-Routledge drove through, thus potentially denying the right to life for a large proportion of the population'. Adrienne Germain, president of the International Women's Health Coalition, said that after her organisation had met Madlala-Routledge in March, 'we were convinced that a new era was possible for HIV and AIDS in South Africa'.

Anger over nursing council's 'ill service'

Nursing unions have demanded rigorous changes at the beleaguered South African Nursing Council. They blame its administration and governance woes for the massive nurse shortages in the country. Recently the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA), with close to 70 000 members, said the body took too long to register nurses after they have completed their training. As a result, nurses have had to wait – some as long as a year – to be properly registered. It is only then that they can seek employment. The unions said this hampered attempts to address the gross staff shortages in the country's health sector. The South African Democratic Nurses Union (SADNU), with about 10 000 members, said it had repeatedly asked Health Minister Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang to get the Council's affairs in order.

Call to sack Manto over R25bn missing in Eastern Cape

The Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM) recently called for the sacking of Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-

Msimang over R25 billion missing from the Eastern Cape Health Department. PSAM director Colm Allan said Mbeki should have 'no hesitation' in firing the Minister. 'What cannot be covered up is the appalling state of the Eastern Cape Health Department. And the person with ultimate responsibility for this is the Minister,' Allan said. 'Over the past 10 years the Health Department has received nine audit disclaimers from the Auditor-General. The department's financial records have been in such a shambles – it is impossible to say whether the budget has been properly spent or stolen.' Audit reports show the Auditor-General issued audit disclaimers for nearly R25 billion.

Still breathing in death

Patients with a highly infectious and potentially deadly strain of tuberculosis were put in general wards at a government hospital embroiled in a controversy over baby deaths. At least 3 people suffering from multidrug-resistant TB shared wards with patients who had non-infectious illnesses, such as diabetes, at Frere Hospital in East London. The hospital has been in the spotlight after an exposé by the *Daily Dispatch* blamed numerous baby deaths on staff shortages, overworked staff and a lack of equipment. Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang confirmed that her 9 provincial counterparts will be conducting visits to Eastern Cape hospitals at the end of the month. Speaking at a press briefing at Durban's Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hospital, she said this was to deal with what she described as 'serious challenges'.

Defective condoms pass quality test

The South African Bureau of Standards (SABS) has been rocked by a condom bribery scandal. This has resulted in condoms that failed quality testing being passed on to the public. According to a *Sowetan* investigation, more than 6.3 million defective condoms might have been released to the public as a result of the scam, putting millions at the risk of contracting HIV. The company involved in the scam, Latex Surgical Products (LSP), has a 3-year contract with the Department of Health (DoH) through Zaltex, its black economic empowerment wing. The SABS has suspended the official implicated in this scam after a 2-day preliminary investigation (*Sowetan*, 22 August 2007). The Health Department says: 'We condemned the actions of the official of the SABS, who has put millions of people

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at risk by illegally passing condoms which had not met the quality assurance requirements. The Health Department are recalling both condom consignments for March and July from warehouses and health facilities throughout the country. We will also approach the national treasury, which is responsible for management of the contract, to discuss the way forward.'

SA among world champs in booze and dope abuse

Ten million South Africans drink 20.1 litres of pure alcohol a year – each. That's the equivalent of 196 six-packs of beer and 62 bottles of spirits each. This is according to statistics released by the Central Drug Authority last month in Pretoria, where Social Welfare Minister Zola Skweyiya addressed the media on the scourge of substance abuse. Statistics taken from the World Drug Report and the Medical Research Council show that children as young as 10 were experimenting with drugs.

Africa

Doctors in plea for access

Somalia is at 'crisis point' with emergency aid blocked by increasing insecurity, leaving thousands of wounded people without health care, the international medical agency Doctors without Borders said. The Geneva-based group known by its French abbreviation MSF urged the conflict's warring parties to allow medical staff to work unhindered, and to give injured persons unfettered access to health care in the capital Mogadishu. Christophe Fournier, president of MSF International, who spoke after a brief trip to Mogadishu, called the violence 'appalling'. It had led to a deterioration of proper health care facilities, with doctors unable to treat patients and wounded people fearing to travel to hospitals.

Diarrhoea hits Zimbabwe

Cases of diarrhoea and dysentery have soared to 900 a day in Harare, with health authorities blaming water shortages. City health director Prosper Chonzi said each of Harare's 60 public clinics was treating an average of 15 water-related complaints a day, while private doctors were dealing with many more, the *Herald* newspaper said. No deaths have been reported. State radio said taps ran dry in impoverished townships around Harare for up to 3 days at a time.

International

Breast cancer vaccine 'safe'

A vaccine designed to treat breast cancer appeared to be safe for women with advanced disease and showed signs of actually slowing down tumours, US researchers have reported. Dendreon Corporate, the manufacturer of the Provenge prostate cancer vaccine, calls the new vaccine Neuvenge. It targets a type of breast cancer called her2/neu-positive breast cancer, which affects between 20% and 30% of breast cancer patients.

Scientists revisit 'virus' therapy to fight superbugs

A type of 'good' virus that infects and kills many types of harmful bacteria is being investigated by scientists in the fight against antibiotic-resistant superbugs such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA). A cream containing the viruses, known as bacteriophages (phages), has been developed to eliminate hospital-acquired infections and could be available within 3 years. Since the viruses reproduce themselves, repeat treatments won't be needed as frequently as with antibiotics.

French doctor unaware he gave Viagra to paedophile

A French prison doctor accused of prescribing Viagra to a paedophile

suspected of raping a child after his release said he had not known that the man was a sex offender. Police say that Francis Evrard, a 61-year-old repeat offender, spent 18 years in prison for raping children before being freed, then snatched a 5-year-old boy from a street in the northern town of Roubaix. He was located with the help of a new nationwide alert system that makes extensive use of radio and television announcements. The case prompted President Nicolas Sarkozy to pledge that paedophiles would in future be assessed by doctors and be treated in hospital if they still posed a threat at the end of their sentence.

Mouth-to-mouth of no help?

Adding mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to chest compression hurt, rather than helped, the survival of people who suffered cardiac arrest, a Japanese study found. The study examined more than 4 000 adults who received emergency treatment from bystanders when they collapsed because their hearts stopped beating. The result: better neurological function in 10.1% of those who had only chest compression that started within 4 minutes of cardiac arrest, compared with 5.1% of those who also were given mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Oldest natural mom gave birth at the age of 59

A British housewife became the world's oldest natural mother after giving birth at the age of 59, it was claimed last month. Dawn Brooke had a healthy boy without any fertility treatment only 12 months before she became eligible for her old-age pension. Her husband, former company director Raymond Brooke, said the couple had kept the 1997 birth private for a decade to let their son grow up in peace. Brooke, now 74, has spoken for the first time about their delight at having a child so late in life.

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