

NEWS BITES

INTERNATIONAL

Strongest Ritalin warning yet

American federal science advisers voted narrowly last month to recommend the most serious type of warning labels for Ritalin and other stimulants used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The 8 - 7 vote by the Food and Drug Administration committee recommended adding 'black box' safety warnings to ADHD drugs. The agency's data on Ritalin, Concerta, Methylin and Metadate suggested a link between the drugs and an increased risk of sudden death and serious cardiovascular problems, including heart attacks.

Between 1999 and 2003, 25 people, including 19 children, died and 54 more suffered serious cardiovascular problems after taking drugs to treat ADHD, the US government reported.

We're not alone

Criminal gangs are targeting British hospitals and stealing expensive medical equipment to sell it abroad on the black market, the BBC reported. A hospital in York had £300 000 (R3.2 million) worth of endoscopy equipment used for internal examinations taken in a raid. Health trusts have been told to improve security. The North Yorkshire police, who have been working with forces around the country, are aware of 10 instances during which medical equipment was stolen from hospitals.

Mozzies as predictable as the weather?

Scientists have unveiled a weather forecasting computer model able to provide up to 5 months' warning of malaria epidemics in countries most vulnerable, according to a study published in the science journal, *Nature*. It says that climate drives both the development of the malaria parasite and the behaviour of mosquitoes that carry it. Monitoring population vulnerability, rainfall and health surveillance, the computer model predicts and detects changes in the seasonal pattern of the disease.

Bird flu spreading

India has reported its first suspected human death from bird flu, a day after announcing its first infections of the H5N1 strain of the virus in the country. The outbreak and subsequent death have sparked an emergency campaign to control the virus before it spreads. About 700 000 chickens will be culled. Outbreaks in birds are being reported daily in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. France has

confirmed that a wild duck found dead near the border with Switzerland was infected with the virus. European Union countries affected include Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Ukraine and Russia.

According to the World Health Organisation, the virus has infected 171 people worldwide and killed 93, all believed to have been infected by poultry.

AFRICA

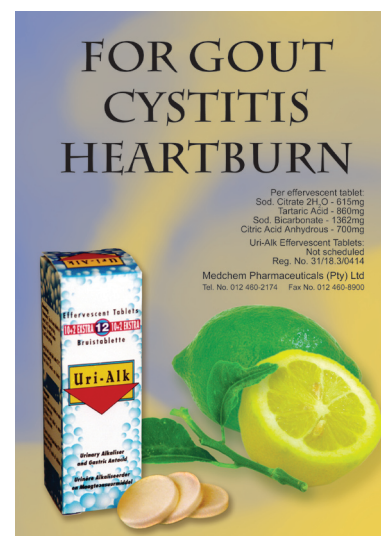
UNAIDS executive director, Peter Piot, warned that a human outbreak of bird flu in Africa would be a 'massive blow' to the campaign to reign in AIDS, adding, 'we're skating on very thin ice here'. Nigerian health authorities began screening dozens of people working on a farm hit by the bird flu strain, amid fears that the virus might have spread to humans for the first time in Africa.

Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo met international donors, and announced the formation of a special monitoring cell to track and stem the growing pandemic wreaking havoc in northern Nigeria.

SOUTH AFRICA

No flap here!

Plans to institute a bird flu campaign in South Africa will only be done once parliament has debated the matter, said Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, adding that extra funding for a possible outbreak in the country would not be put aside. However, the Medicines Control Council has registered Roche's antiviral drug Tamiflu, considered the best weapon for treating people should avian flu mutate into a form easily transmitted between people. It



remains to be seen how swiftly South Africa can obtain supplies.

Time Thami turns things around?

Health Department Director General Thami Mseleku has been appointed as the Registrar of Medicines at the Medicines Control Council as a stop-gap measure to avoid 'any further delays' in the registration of medicines. No clarity could be obtained as to who will eventually take up the job full time.

Medicine registration backlogs are being described by industry sources as 'huge', with delays of up to 40 months, twice the international average of 20 - 22 months.

AIDS drug almost impossible to obtain

Pressure is mounting on the Medicines Control Council to fast-track the registration of a safer antiretroviral drug. Called tenofovir, it is a replacement for the widely used d4T, which is proving to be highly toxic for many patients. Tenofovir is an important drug for patients who suffer from lactic acidosis, a life-threatening side-effect of the first-line antiretroviral d4T.

State condones 'AIDS herbs'

The Health Department said that people who prefer to use traditional treatments for HIV/AIDS, even untested ones, must be allowed to do so. This follows a *City Press* report about Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang's advocacy of herbal medicine. 'People who prefer to use traditional medicines should be allowed to use them,' said the department spokesperson, Sibani Mngadi. Asked whether the use

of untested treatments was not a concern, he said 'The issue with traditional medicines is that they become available on whatever knowledge the practitioner has. What the department emphasises is that we need to invest more in research and development of traditional medicines.' The DA said Tshabalala-Msimang would be responsible for any deaths resulting from her alleged promotion of untested treatments.

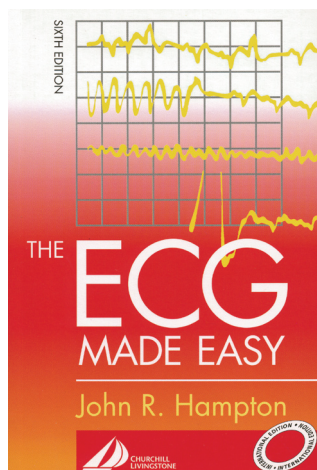
Traditional AIDS drug distributed

The Health Minister gave her support to yet another untested AIDS drug and the health department said that those who try to prevent the distribution of the drug – a 'traditional African medicine' called Ubhejane – were racists who wanted to undermine African medicines. Ubhejane is being distributed among people with HIV and AIDS in KwaZulu-Natal and has not been clinically tested.

SA to ease entry for foreign specialists

In the first major development since President Thabo Mbeki's state-of-the nation undertaking to attract scarce skills to the country, government has published a comprehensive list of skilled professionals who can apply for permits. Immigration Act regulations have long been criticised for making it difficult for local and foreign companies to import skills. It's the first time government has specified the professional categories that work permit quotas will apply to since the new Immigration Act was adopted. These regulations are a major departure from the system that required proof that a South African could not have filled the post.

Chris Bateman



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