

NEWS BITES

INTERNATIONAL

'Fetuses cannot feel pain before 26th week'

A human fetus does not feel pain before the 26th week of gestation, according to a clinical review. And while they might produce a response to a pain stimulus after 26 weeks, this does not mean that they feel pain. So writes Dr Stuart Derbyshire, a psychologist from the University of Birmingham, in the *British Medical Journal*. Legislation is being considered in the USA to make it mandatory for pain-reducing drugs to be used before abortions undertaken later than 22 weeks.

Guinea pig could lose his fingers and toes after experiment

One of the guinea pigs in the medical tests that led to 6 volunteers being admitted to a London hospital will probably lose his fingers and toes owing to his body's reaction to the tested medication. Ryan Wilson, who was in a coma for 3 weeks, told the British media how his fingers and toes, most of which are pitch black, will eventually fall off. Various organs in his body, including his heart and liver, collapsed as a result of the pills. He says he took part in the trials because of the R22 000 compensation.

Cholesterol raises risk of prostate cancer

Men with high cholesterol levels are more likely to get prostate cancer, Italian scientists now claim. The researchers say gallstone sufferers are also at a greater risk of developing the disease. The study by researchers at the Mario Negri Institute of Pharmacological Research in Milan may explain why Western countries – where cholesterol-rich diets are common – have higher rates of prostate cancer. The researchers studied data from 1991 to 2002 involving 1 294 prostate cancer patients and a control group. Published in *Annals of Oncology*, the study suggests that hormones called androgens, created from the 'building blocks' of cholesterol, may be responsible for the cancer.

Condoms may be OK, sometimes – Pope

Catholic church officials recently confirmed that Pope Benedict XVI had requested a report on whether it might be acceptable for Catholics to use condoms in one narrow circumstance: to protect life inside a marriage when one partner is infected with HIV or is sick with AIDS.

Whatever the Pope decides, church officials and other experts broadly agree that it is remarkable that so delicate an issue is being taken up. But they also agree that such an inquiry is logical, and particularly significant from this

Pope, who was Pope John Paul II's strict enforcer of church doctrine.

The issue has surfaced repeatedly as one of the most complicated and delicate facing the church. For years, some influential cardinals and theologians have argued for a change for couples affected by AIDS in the name of protecting life, while others have fiercely attacked the possibility as demoting the church's long advocacy of abstinence and marital fidelity to fight the disease.

Bird flu rapid response drug stockpile

Swiss pharmaceutical giant Roche Holding says a rapid-response stockpile of the antiviral drug Tamiflu, used to treat avian influenza, is at the disposal of the World Health Organization (WHO). The stockpile of 3 million treatment courses – or 30 million capsules – could be used by the WHO in response to any pandemic influenza outbreak. Roche would deliver the required stockpile to an international airport of the WHO's choice.

AFRICA

Bird flu spreads to sixth African country

Ivory Coast is the sixth African nation to report an outbreak of the H5N1 strain of bird flu, the World Organization for Animal Health said last month. Signs of the deadly disease were detected in two populous neighbourhoods of its main city, Abidjan. Other African nations hit by the disease include Nigeria, Niger, Egypt, Burkina Faso and Cameroon. Sudan has also reported a bird flu outbreak, but this has not yet been confirmed as H5N1. Bird flu has spread rapidly since late 2003 from Asia to Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The virus has killed 113 people.

SOUTH AFRICA

Manto forced to re-visit health care salaries

Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang told delegates at a health summit in White River, Mpumalanga, that health professionals were not refusing to treat the nation's poor because they were greedy, but because of the poor conditions in which they were expected to work and live.

'The entire remuneration package is being revised and we will have the first recommendations on what the salary scale should be by July,' she said. The Departments of Health, Public Service and Administration and the Treasury

are jointly revising the remuneration packages. The recommended structure will then be presented to the Public Service Bargaining Council, which will ensure a uniform system of pay throughout government.

Aggressive recruitment

According to a report released by the WHO, more than one-third of South Africa's medical doctors, or 37%, are working overseas. More than 70% of all positions advertised in the local *Business Times* (careers) in the last quarter were for government departments, parastatals or NGOs. Of the government adverts, 23% (1 768) were for posts in the Department of Health. The government's recruitment pattern ties in with reports last month that public hospitals are short of one-third of the doctors they need.

Bara officials suspended amid huge graft probe

Four employees of Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital have been suspended with immediate effect after an investigation into multimillion Rand fraud. A spokesperson for the Gauteng Health department, Simon Zwane, said the administrative officials dealt with procurements and service providers. They were suspended after a preliminary report was handed to the department. The hospital's exact loss because of the alleged fraudulent activities has yet to be established.

SA's chronic disease deaths expected to hit 666 per day by 2010

Chronic diseases such as hypertension, high cholesterol and diabetes are expected to kill 666 South Africans daily by the year 2010, the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) said last month. The MRC's Professor Krisela Steyn said 'The majority of the South African population has moved towards a disease profile related to an unhealthy Western lifestyle'. She was commenting on a report entitled chronic diseases of lifestyle in South Africa: 1995 - 2005.

It suggests that there are about 6 million South Africans with hypertension and 5 million with high cholesterol levels. Lifestyle-related cancers had been increasing in the country. Also worrying was the high numbers of people moving to urban areas, as urbanisation was found to be a factor behind hypertension and diabetes, Steyn said. The report starkly highlights the need for proper health care in South Africa for people with chronic diseases of lifestyle, particularly at primary care level, said Steyn.

Another challenge facing South Africa was that it had to cope with both chronic and acute diseases. Even highly sophisticated Western countries with more health care resources did not have to provide equally for both acute and chronic conditions – their focus was largely on chronic conditions, said Steyn.

Netcare in R23.7 billion UK deal

Netcare, South Africa's largest hospital group, last month announced the R23.7 billion acquisition of the UK's General

Healthcare Group (GHG) in a deal that gives the company the biggest market share among hospital groups in the UK.

After more than a year of preparation, which included obtaining approval from the Reserve Bank, Netcare placed a bid for GHG, which was accepted. Richard Friedland, Netcare's chief executive, said the company's hospital management background combined with UK funders as partners had helped the bid 'pip other world players to the winning post'.

He said: 'Outside of the US, this deal probably makes Netcare the largest hospital group'. Julien Veron, an analyst with Andisa Securities, said although the size of the acquisition was surprising, the location was not.

'After the ructions over the South African government's efforts to reform the local health care sector, Netcare appeared keener to look at other pastures in order to balance out regulatory risk,' he said.

GHG brings with it a national network of 49 hospitals, 2 400 beds and a 25% market share in the UK. The deal boosts Netcare's numbers to 120 hospitals, more than 11 500 hospital beds and 24 874 employees.

Manto takes over mortuaries

The health department is to take control of all government forensic mortuaries that have been under the South African Police Service after the cabinet's decision to have all medico-legal mortuaries co-ordinated under one ministry.

The move will see South Africa's first comprehensive forensic pathology service established to alter the way crime scenes are investigated, with experts from the police and the health department gathering evidence for different reasons.

Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang said that government had reviewed the services provided by medico-legal mortuaries or what used to be called state mortuaries, and found they were fragmented and poorly co-ordinated.

It found capacity problems due to skills shortages, dilapidated infrastructure, inadequate mortuary equipment and insufficient vehicles.

Tshabalala-Msimang said she had established a national directorate to oversee the service and a R72m budget had been allocated for an emergency maintenance and upgrading project, including the purchasing of urgently required equipment and vehicles. 'Starting from April, the forensic mortuaries are vested under the authority of provincial health departments, including personnel, equipment and other logistical services,' she said.

The police will still have full authority over the body.

Chris Bateman