

NEWS BITES

INTERNATIONAL

Ban female circumcision, says WHO after study on childbirth risk

The World Health Organization (WHO) has called for an end to female circumcision after the first data proved 'significant' risk at childbirth to these women and their babies. This highly controversial practice is steeped in culture and tradition, but the WHO wants to put a stop to it and is totally against it being done even by medical staff. Circumcision of women is classified into three groups according to severity, and the WHO study has shown beyond doubt that this severity is related directly to the degree of childbirth complications experienced.

Gift for baby born with three arms

Doctors have successfully removed an abnormally well-developed third arm on a 2-month-old baby boy from Shanghai. Babies born with an extra limb usually have one much more developed than the other on that side. But both of baby Jiejie's left arms were well formed and neither was fully functional, giving doctors pause over which one to remove. They opted to remove the arm that was smaller and lay bent close to the body, but said that years of rehabilitation would be needed to make the remaining left arm function properly. The arm is normally shaped but does not move unless it is pulled and does not have a palm.

AFRICA

Millions missing: Ugandan ministry accused of diverting AIDS funds

A Ugandan government commission investigating allegations that international aid has been misappropriated has recommended that Health Minister Jim Muhwezi, his deputy and other top officials be investigated. The commission has demanded that Ugandan officials return millions of dollars it alleges they siphoned off for their personal use. The missing money comes from the Global Fund for TB, Malaria and HIV/AIDS based in Geneva. The Global Fund, which had earmarked R1.355 billion for the Ugandan AIDS programme, suspended its funding in August 2005 after an earlier audit found gross mismanagement of its fund by government officials. But by then about R303 million of the grant had been sent to the country.

SOUTH AFRICA

And our new HR plan is....

A new human resources plan by the Department of Health could potentially halve the number of foreign medical doctors in South Africa, leaving the poor scrambling for proper health care, warns Dr Mignonne Breier, a chief research specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council. The plan hopes to, *inter alia*, limit the brain drain from other countries in Africa, where there are fewer doctors.

But, says Breier, without the foreign doctors in South Africa, there will be 'serious consequences' as the country already suffers from a severe doctor and nurse shortage. Currently about 5 277 foreign-qualified doctors work in South Africa, accounting for about 16% of the 33 347 total. Breier says South Africa has fewer than 7 doctors per 10 000 people whereas the UK has 21, the USA 24 and many European countries more than 30. 'Our own doctors emigrate in significant numbers, estimated at 150 per year, and of those who stay, 60% work in the private sector where they serve less than 20% of the population.' With most opting to work in urban areas, rural areas are particularly at a loss. 'The medical services that do exist in these areas are being provided largely by foreign doctors,' Breier asserts. 'It is clear the government will have to invest much more money in the education of medical doctors if it wants to meet its stated objective of doubling numbers in the next 8 years (from 1 200 to 2 400 by 2014). The number of graduates from the 8 medical schools has increased by only 32% in the 12 years between 1994 and 2005. 'How they now plan to double this in 8 years is difficult to understand,' adds Breier.

Many public servants believe HIV/AIDS can be cured - survey

Several AIDS lobby groups have voiced their concern at the findings of research conducted by the Public Service Commission (PSC) that 'a high percentage of public servants believe HIV/AIDS can be cured'. Confusion around HIV/AIDS is a direct result of the mixed messages from the Presidency and the Department of Health, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) said. The PSC said the finding was particularly worrying since public servants included health professionals who are continually exposed to the disease and its effects. 'That even a miniscule proportion of the public service believes there is a cure for AIDS should be viewed gravely,' the report said.

According to TAC spokesperson Dennis Matwa, mixed messages from leadership created confusion about the disease in the minds of ordinary South Africans. 'Looking also at the

comments that came out of the Jacob Zuma rape trial, those in leadership positions are creating this confusion,' he said.

High Court dismisses kickback doctors' appeal against HPCSA ruling

The Transvaal Provincial Division of the High Court has dismissed with costs an appeal by two doctors who tried to reverse penalties imposed on them by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) in 2000. Dr Percy Miller and Dr Julius Preddy are two of the four doctors found guilty of unprofessional conduct for their involvement in a kickback scheme where they received money for referring radiology patients to one radiology practice of Dr Illes and partners. The four practitioners were initially found guilty by the Professional Conduct Committee of the Medical and Dental Professions Board. Unhappy about the conviction and sentence, they lodged an appeal with the Appeals Committee of the HPCSA, which was dismissed. They then appealed to the High Court in terms of section 20 of the Health Professions Act, 56 of 1974.

In the appeal judgement, handed down on 9 June, the court upheld the ruling of the Appeals Committee but substituted the 1 day per week community service to 800 hours over a period of 2 years. One of the doctors involved in the kickback scheme, Dr Leonard Nainkin, withdrew his appeal before proceedings were finalised.

The decision of the Appeal Court is as follows: The practitioners have been sentenced to 5 years' suspension from the register, but the suspension has been suspended on the following conditions:

- that they are not found guilty of a similar offence during the period of suspension
- that each of them is to repay the amount received from the radiologists to the HPCSA – Dr Miller must repay R765 153.00 and Dr Preddy has to repay R156 792.00
- that they are to perform community service in the public service hospitals for 800 hours over a period of 2 years from judgement date.

'We are happy that the High Court has vindicated the HPCSA and put to nullity (sic) some of the wild and baseless accusations made by Dr Percy Miller against the Council. The message is clear – if you engage in perverse incentives (which is to the detriment of the patients in the final analysis) we will catch you, prosecute and sentence you,' said HPCSA Registrar, Advocate Boyce Mkhize.

SA's private hospitals – 'we're reigning in inflation'

South Africa's private hospital industry's efforts to bring its own inflation rate within the SA Reserve Bank's target range of 3 - 6% have paid off, according to the Hospital Association of South Africa (HASA). The results of a

comprehensive, independent economic study show that the industry achieved an inflation rate of just 5.2% for the 2005 fiscal year.

Advocate Kurt Worrall-Clare, acting CEO of HASA, which represents the majority of private hospitals in the country, says that this is not only a substantial decline on the 8.1% achieved in 2004, but is also less than South Africa's overall medical inflation rate of 7%, and lower than the average increase of medical schemes, which statistics put at an increase of 6.9% over the same period.

'The low 5.2% inflation rate demonstrates how the private hospital industry has worked hard to reign in and contain costs,' says Worrall-Clare. 'The data also demonstrate our intention and collective objective to ensure that, wherever possible, private hospital costs are better managed and brought under control so that more South Africans will have access to affordable, quality private health care.'

Gauteng hospitals fail to achieve minimum standards

More Gauteng government hospitals could get the thumbs down after over half of them failed to achieve minimum standards set by an independent watchdog body. Basic expectations such as cleanliness, patient safety and a fully stocked pharmacy have proved too big a task for the South Rand, Pretoria West and Coronation hospitals, which now face being placed on the critical list. Dr Clarence Mini, head of an independent accreditation committee tasked with the monitoring of quality in public hospitals by the provincial health authorities, said that some of the hospitals given the thumbs up last year could have their approval withdrawn.

Benefit structure overhaul will 'push low-income earners out of the market'

Medical aid schemes have urged the Council for Medical Schemes to reconsider its plans to overhaul the way benefits are structured and financed, saying its proposals will push up costs and drive people on low incomes out of the market. The Board of Healthcare Funders (BHF), which represents medical schemes, said the Council's proposals would make low-end benefit packages more expensive and discourage membership unless cheaper alternatives were available.

Fewer SA nurses in UK

The number of South African nurses registered with the Nursing and Midwifery Council in the UK dropped by 55% between 2002 and 2005, Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang announced. The number shrank from 2 144 to 933 over this period 'as a result of' an agreement with the UK aimed at lessening the local effect of health professionals moving abroad.

Chris Bateman