



Imperial Tobacco plans to deny link between smoking and lung cancer

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Specialists clarify when the benefits of HRT outweigh the risks

The benefits of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may outweigh the risks if the woman has distressing menopausal symptoms or a premature menopause—but no evidence exists to support a role for HRT in preventing osteoporosis, heart disease, or Alzheimer's disease. This is the message of a consensus statement issued by a conference held in the United Kingdom this week.

The conference was convened by the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh to clarify the use of HRT in clinical practice in response to growing concern about its safety. Results from several major trials published recently, including the million women study (16 August, p 359), have shown that certain types of HRT could double the risk of breast cancer over 10 years in some women.

The consensus statement—developed by specialists in HRT from around the world—found that HRT was highly effective in the relief of vasomotor symptoms and hormone related mood change and insomnia associated with the menopause. It proposed that the benefit of symptom relief had to be offset against a small increase in the absolute risk of breast cancer, cardiovascular disease, and stroke.

Susan Mayor *London*

See www.rcpe.ac.uk/esd/consensus/statements.html

Digital archive of *Lancet* is launched

Every issue of the *Lancet* going back to its first edition in 1823 is now available in digital format.

A two year project, which involved scanning and storing more than 370 000 articles, has produced a searchable database, which will be available for a one-off purchase payment. The cost will vary according to the size of the institution. For a medium sized institution, it will be about



Exhibition challenges views on autism

The work of artist Stephen Wiltshire (example above), regarded as one of the most outstanding autistic savants in the world, is on show in an exhibition in Twickenham, London, which aims to challenge preconceived ideas about the condition.

The exhibition, "Not a Camera," includes works by other autistic artists, including Roy Wenzel, Peter Myers, and Jacob Williams, all clients of the United Kingdom's National Autistic Society.

Autistic savants have skills that most people don't, such as unusually good memories or musical or artistic abilities. It has been estimated that 10% of people with autism have these skills, compared with one per cent in the general population.

Lynn Eaton *London*

For more details of the exhibition, which is open until 30 November, contact Orleans House, Riverside, Twickenham (tel 020 8831 6000).

£55 000 (\$91 700; €78 400), or 15p (\$0.25; €0.21) per article.

By the end of 2004, ScienceDirect, the company running the project, hopes to have articles from all the 1800 titles owned by Elsevier, publishers of the *Lancet*, added to the archive. The database is eventually expected to contain six million articles.

Dr Richard Horton, editor of the *Lancet*, said at the project's launch last week: "Medical journals must be one of the greatest benefits to mankind... They often act as the conscience of the medical profession."

Among the articles which can now be accessed on the ScienceDirect database are "On the antiseptic principle in the practice of surgery" by Joseph Lister (1867), and "Penicillin as a chemotherapeutic agent" by E Chain and H W Florey (1940).

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

For more information, see www.info.sciencedirect.com

GP suspended for lying to cover up negligence

A north London GP accused of forging a letter and lying in another letter to cover up negligent treatment of two patients has been suspended for 12 months by the General Medical Council.

Dr Ahmed Abdelsalam Moneeb of Palmers Green was found to have made misleading and dishonest statements in a letter that he wrote in response to a complaint by a patient, Ms Margaret Cleary. She had said he diagnosed her with influenza over the telephone and refused to make a home visit. Ms Cleary later admitted herself to hospital and was found to have viral pneumonia.

When Ms Cleary complained, Dr Moneeb responded in a letter that he had not been working on the day in question.

More than a year later, he admitted that this was untrue but said he had been misled by incorrect diary entries. The GMC's Professional Conduct Committee rejected this argument.

The GMC failed to prove, however, its most serious charge against Dr Moneeb. He had been accused of forging a letter urgently referring a 2 year old girl to hospital. The child, Berna Asam, was brought by her parents to Dr Moneeb's practice four times between June and September 2000, with a range of symptoms. On the last occasion, Dr Moneeb said he would refer her urgently to the Whittington Hospital, north London.

By 2 October, however, the parents had not heard from the hospital, and took Berna to see a private doctor. She later died from a brain tumour.

When the parents made a formal complaint, Dr Moneeb produced a copy of a letter dated 16 September, which he said had been faxed and posted to the Whittington Hospital, asking that Berna be admitted as a matter of urgency. The hospital said it never received this letter.

The council found the charge of forgery not proved. Owen Dyer *London*

Imperial Tobacco plans to deny link between smoking and lung cancer

Imperial Tobacco, one of Britain's biggest cigarette manufacturers, is planning to deny a proved link between smoking and lung cancer in the Scottish Court of Session, where it is fighting a damages claim from a former smoker. It is the first such case in the United Kingdom to reach the stage of a full hearing.

Margaret McTear, the widow of Alfred McTear, who died of lung cancer aged 48 in 1993, is suing Imperial Tobacco for £500 000 (\$830 000; €710 000). Mr McTear lodged the claim shortly before his death.

The court heard the transcript of an interview that Mr McTear gave to his lawyer a week before his death in which he blamed the advertising that

was current in 1964, when he took up the habit. He said that if the advertisements had carried warnings, he would never have begun smoking. Warnings were introduced in Britain in 1971.

The company has also filed papers into court which, according to the *Observer* newspaper, say: "Cigarette smoking has not been scientifically established as a cause of lung cancer. The cause or causes of lung cancer are unknown."

Owen Dyer *London*

NHS aims to increase number of ethnic minority staff in management

A special support programme is being launched this week to ensure that black and ethnic minority staff are proportionally represented in senior management roles in the NHS.

Currently just 1% of executive board jobs in the NHS are occupied by people who are black or from an ethnic minority background, according to the NHS leadership centre. This figure is much lower than the 7% of black and ethnic minority staff who make up the healthcare workforce.

The development programme was launched at conference, *Breaking Through: Black and Minority Ethnic Leadership in the NHS*, in Birmingham this week.

Zosia Kmiotowicz *London*

For more information about the programme, phone the NHS Leadership Centre (020 7592 1025).

Iraq health minister seeks more funds for future health system

Iraq's interim health minister, Khudair Abbas, is hoping to raise \$1.6bn (£1bn; €1.4bn) at a donors' conference in Madrid, Spain, next week when he pre-

sents new plans to rebuild Iraq's health system—virtually from scratch—over the next four years, public health officials said.

Dr Abbas has drawn up a blueprint for Iraq's future public health system and an assessment of the occupied country's immediate public health needs in collaboration with the World Health Organization and the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq.

Rebuilding Iraq's health system is a top reconstruction priority along with electricity, water, and education.

David Nabarro, a senior WHO official appointed by the United Nations and the World Bank to help Dr Abbas prepare the needs assessment, said that about \$1bn had already been raised for 2004 from US government funds and oil revenues. An additional \$500m was needed for 2004 and a further \$1.1bn for 2005 to 2007, he said.

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

Half of UK doctors experience violence or abuse from patients

Half of all doctors in the United Kingdom experience some degree of violence or abuse from patients, including verbal abuse, threats, and physical assaults, a survey published this week has found. But many feel too guilty or embarrassed to report violent patients and blame themselves or the incompetencies of the healthcare system.

GPs, and hospital doctors working in accident and emergency medicine, psychiatry, and obstetrics and gynaecology are the most likely to experience abuse, with a quarter facing five or more such episodes in a year, shows the survey, conducted by the BMA.

Just over 800 out of 3000 community and hospital based doctors around the United Kingdom completed the questionnaire on violence.

Zosia Kmiotowicz *London*

Copies of *Violence at Work: The Experience of UK Doctors* can be obtained at www.bma.org.uk

Murderer can be forced to take medication to become sane enough to be executed

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

The US Supreme Court has let stand a ruling by a federal appeals court in February that officials in the state of Arkansas had the right to force a convicted murderer to take drug treatment to make him sane enough to be executed.

In 1986 the Supreme Court proclaimed it illegal to execute people unless they understood that they were being put to death and why.

An appeals court based in St Louis ruled in February this year that the constitution's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment would not be violated if the authorities forcibly gave antipsychotic medication to the inmate, Charles Laverne Singleton. It was this decision that was upheld by the Supreme Court last week.

The fate of Singleton has veered back and forth since he was convicted of murder and sentenced to death in 1979. He became seriously mentally ill in 1987 and in October 2001, a panel of the 8th circuit put a permanent stay on his execution, ruling that he be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

The state appealed, and the St Louis court reversed that ruling in February, saying that it was acceptable to give Singleton the drug treatment to make him sane enough to be executed (*BMJ* 2003;326:A15).

Six of the 11 judges on the St Louis based panel said that because Singleton wanted to receive medication for his mental illness and the state had an interest in having sane prisoners, the fact that the drugs had the "side effect" of making him sane should not affect his fate. The four dissenting judges said it would be wrong to execute Singleton, who becomes paranoid and delusional when not receiving medication, and is sometimes still psychotic even when taking medication. One of the judges abstained.

Singleton's defence had argued that the Arkansas inmate was in a precarious situation: taking antipsychotic medication was in his interest—but not if the

resulting sanity put him on the path to the death chamber.

The Supreme Court last week rejected arguments by Singleton's lawyers that giving him the drugs was not medically useful to him, as the only purpose would be to facilitate the ending of his life.

The Supreme Court ruled in a pair of cases in 1986 that executing insane inmates was prohibited by the eighth amendment's edict against cruel and unusual punishment. But until the Singleton case, no appeals court or the Supreme Court had ruled on whether prisoners may be forced to take medication in order to be made sane enough to be executed.

Singleton was convicted of stabbing grocer Mary Lou York to death in a 1979 robbery. Before dying, she identified him as her attacker. His mental health began to deteriorate in 1987; he said he believed his prison cell was possessed by demons and that the authorities had planted a device in his ear. He insisted that his victim, whom he had known at the time of the murder, was still alive.

The Supreme Court has halted executions of inmates with severe learning difficulties but has refused such protection for mentally ill inmates. □



Charles Singleton

AP PHOTO/DANNY JOHNSTON