

## UK can't cope with sexual health needs

Mareeni Raymond *London*

The NHS in the United Kingdom is struggling to cope with a rise in sexually transmitted infections, a report by the health committee of the House of Commons has shown. The report says that NHS resources are not being used adequately, despite a rapid increase in diagnosed sexually transmitted infections. Last year the number of people diagnosed with HIV increased by a quarter, while people diagnosed with *Chlamydia* increased by 10%.

Committee chairman and Labour MP David Hinchliffe said: "I do not use the word lightly, but during the course of the inquiry, it has become plain that with sexual health we are looking at a public health crisis."

The report says that many

sexual health clinics are understaffed and use out of date equipment. Despite an NHS "Strategy for sexual health," the report says that sexual health is under-funded.

They say that new guidelines are needed to prioritise sexual health, including decreasing waiting times for patients, who at present may wait up to six weeks to see a specialist. The report recommends better staffing, better sex education in schools, and a national screening programme for *Chlamydia* to be introduced.

Public health minister Hazel Blears said the national strategy, published in 2001, would deliver improvements. "There is no quick fix but the NHS is working to reverse the upward trends in infections, tackling inequalities and modernising services."

Vivienne Nathanson, of the BMA, said: "The government needs to tackle this issue as the UK is on the brink of a sexual health crisis."

## Research funded by drug companies introduces bias

Suneeta Kochhar *London*

Studies funded by the pharmaceutical industry are more likely to produce results favourable to the sponsoring company's product than research funded by other sources, according to a systematic review in the *BMJ* (2003;326:1167-70). This finding may be explained by publication bias and choosing inappropriate comparators to new drugs in clinical trials, rather than studies funded by industry being of a lower quality.

The pharmaceutical industry is increasingly funding more clinical trials. The industry spends more on medical research than the National Insti-

tute of Health in the United States. Despite pressure to show that a drug has a favourable outcome, the quality of the methods employed in studies funded by drug companies is comparable to research funded by other sources.

Joel Lexchin and colleagues found that research funded by drug companies takes longer to be published than research funded by other sources and that overall it is less likely to be published or presented. Furthermore, research funded by drug companies is usually presented in symposiums that lack peer review. The researchers comment that even though researchers cannot predict trial results far in advance, drug companies may selectively fund trials on drugs where a favourable outcome seems likely.

Drug companies have tried to prevent studies being published that are unfavourable to their products.

## Nurse trains in surgery to improve patients' experience

Ajay Bagga *Leicester*

Malcolm Clarke, a nurse at Leicester General Hospital, has been trained to perform carpal tunnel operations, making way for a new service where patients can be treated quickly and effectively.

Patients with carpal tunnel syndrome usually wait a long time for an operation to decompress the median nerve in the carpal tunnel, but Clarke offers a shorter waiting time and a much more relaxed atmosphere.

Patients are referred to him via their general practitioner and can make an appointment to have the operation at any time during the weekday mornings. The actual operation only lasts half an hour and is performed in a ward treat-

ment room of a ward so patients do not need to go to theatre.

As the waiting list is short, patients are seen much quicker and this decreases the risk of irreversible nerve damage. Clarke uses local anaesthetic to perform the operation so patients can choose to watch him perform the operation or even invite a relative into the room for support during the operation.

The flexibility of the system means that it is easier for mothers and employees to have the operation around their normal schedule and this ease has attracted patients as far as Yorkshire to come and use the service.

Patients who use the service are still under the care of one of the twelve consultants in the unit. This is intended to ensure patient safety as they are on hand if Clarke needs any further help.

Clarke said, "This is a proven service, is safe, audited, and patients like it. I hope that it will spread across the country so that patients everywhere can benefit from it."

## Exercising in the afternoon is better than the morning

Karen Hebert *Bristol*

Phyllis Zee, a neurologist from Northwestern University, has challenged the view that morning workouts are better than exercising in the afternoon.

"The best time to workout is in the late afternoon," Zee told US television channel CNN. "The reason for that is that your muscle strength is at its peak, its highest. You are going to be less likely to injure yourself. It is also a time when people are most awake and alert."

According to Zee, circadian rhythms are key. These are innate rhythms that conform to the 24 hour cycle of light and dark, generated by the firing rate of neurons in the hypothalamus in the brain. Circadian rhythms are implicated in the regulation of

several physiological processes that include body temperature, metabolism, and blood pressure.

The regulation of body temperature seems to be most important. Two to three hours before waking, body temperature is at its lowest, peaking in the afternoon between 2 pm and 4 pm.

At this time of day muscles are warm and flexible, which means less injury and better performance. It is also likely that the workout is perceived as being easier than in the morning.

This viewpoint is not shared by all exercise experts. Exercise in the morning is better for fat burning. The body is required to burn calories early in the day; this increases the metabolic rate and this is sustained through the day.

Although the experts still disagree on the ideal time of day to exercise they are in agreement over one point. It is thought that the most important thing is that people exercise, and that they exercise regularly and maintain a consistent programme.