

United States

Fatal drug overdoses double

Fatal unintentional drug overdoses in the United States almost doubled from 1999 to 2004, to become the second leading cause of unintentional death after car crashes, government figures have shown. The number of deaths from unintentional overdoses rose to 19 838 in 2004 from 11 155 in 1999, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They did not say which drugs played the greatest role. Researchers said that they thought sedatives and prescription painkillers were the main cause of the rise (www.ap.org).

China

Drug firm allegations

China has detained a former head of its food and drug agency as it conducts a national investigation into corruption in the country's fast growing drug industry. The probe was ordered by senior government leaders, including the prime minister, Wen Jiabao. Small drug makers in China have long been accused of producing counterfeit versions of drugs and selling them to China's hospitals and pharmacies with disastrous consequences. Now the government says corruption was a major part of the problem. It said it had detained Zheng Xiaoyu, who has headed the agency from its founding in 1998 until June 2005 (www.nytimes.com).

Thailand

State wants cheaper drugs

Thailand has told big drug companies to cut their prices or risk losing out to generic brands. The military-appointed government has already upset international drug companies this year by allowing generic production of patented heart and HIV/AIDS drugs. World trade rules allow governments to issue such licenses to domestic companies for producing generic versions of drugs in healthcare emergencies.

The licences, which Thai health officials said would save the country up to 800m baht a year (£12m; €18m; \$24m), drew praise from AIDS activists, but Washington and the drug industry urged the health ministry to withdraw them (www.reuters.com).

UK employment

Indian doctors appeal

Indian doctors working in the United Kingdom have launched a new round in their legal fight against changing the employment rules that have thrown many



of their careers into confusion.

The British Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (BAPIO) has appealed against a court judgment upholding last year's government decision to prevent doctors from the non-European Economic Area from taking up UK training posts if there are eligible candidates from the area.

More than 10 000 Indian doctors are among the 16 000 overseas postgraduate medical students and junior doctors affected by the new rules, which were introduced last April.

BAPIO is campaigning against applying the rules retrospectively to doctors who were already in Britain. Edwin Borman, chairman of the BMA's international committee, said, "The government's recent treatment of overseas doctors has been very disappointing" (www.thehindu.com).

UK NHS

Give something back

The UK's NHS should do more to help train health workers from developing countries, where efforts to tackle disease are hamstrung by shortages of staff and equipment, the health service's former chief has said.

Lord Nigel Crisp called in a government commissioned report for an NHS scholarship scheme that would allow students and qualified health workers access to UK health service training.

He also recommended measures to improve information exchange between potential donors of equipment and services and the countries that need them, and said NHS staff who volunteer in poor countries should have job and pension continuity when they return.

One third of NHS doctors and one in 10 nurses come from abroad, and some critics have said UK recruitment policies have deprived needy countries of health workers (www.bbc.co.uk).

Portugal

Abortion legalised

Portugal will join most other European countries in allowing abortions, after the government said it would use its parliamentary majority to push the measure through. A referendum on the matter failed because too few people voted, although most people who turned out supported legalisation.

Under this mainly Catholic country's current ban, women having abortions can go to jail for up to three years. When the ban is lifted, Portugal will join most European countries in allowing abortions—only Malta, Ireland, and Poland have much more limiting abortion laws.

Campaigners now hope other liberal laws may be passed, as in neighbouring Spain, such as allowing gay marriage (www.reuters.com).

United States

Uterus transplants approved

A New York surgical team is looking to perform the United States' first uterus transplant. The procedure could allow women without a functioning womb to bear children.

The team at the New York Downtown Hospital recently completed a study showing that wombs could be harvested from cadavers. Potential recipients are being screened.

The hospital's ethics board has conditionally approved the plans. However, the hospital's president has said a transplant is not expected "anytime in the near future."

Such a transplant has been tried once before, in Saudi Arabia in 2000, but that womb came from a live donor and was rejected after three months (www.ap.org).

Drug development

Pneumococcal vaccine pledge

Five rich countries have clubbed together to support a vaccine programme to tackle pneumococcal infection in the developing world. Under the plan, called an advance market commitment, donors have pledged to purchase the vaccine for recipient countries once it is produced, creating a market driven incentive for research and development. Neglected health problems persist because the people who have them are poor, say experts—and drug companies have little financial incentive to develop solutions. Italy, Canada, Norway, Britain, Russia, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have pledged money for the project (www.nytimes.com).