In brief

French jail woman for performing circumcisions: A French court has sentenced a 53 year old woman from Mali to eight years in prison for performing 48 circumcisions on girls aged between 1 month and 10 years. Twenty seven parents were given suspended sentences for taking their daughters to the woman for the operation.

UK defence medical services launches recruitment drive: The UK defence medical services last week launched a £100 000 (\$160 000) campaign to attract 160 doctors and 200 nurses into the armed forces. The services currently have half the doctors they need and three quarters of the nurses.

New class of anticancer drugs shows promise: A new type of anticancer drug, farnesyl-transferase inhibitors, seems to specifically target malignant cells by interacting with Rho proteins, a group of proteins involved in regulating cell size and shape (*Molecular and Cellular Biology* 1999;19:1831-40). Morphological changes are hallmarks of malignancy and allow pathologists to identify cancers. The drugs are only in phase I trials but they seem to be comparatively non-toxic.

Campaign saves Liverpool's blood service: A campaign to enable the Liverpool blood centre to conduct research and development has succeeded, and there has been an official announcement that the centre will be expanded. Bulk testing and processing of blood is to remain in Manchester, where it was transferred in 1997.

Italian doctors charged with fraud: Nearly 500 doctors from Venice and the surrounding region have been charged with claiming state payments for providing treatment to 15 000 dead patients. They claimed an annual allowance of £26 (\$42) for each patient.

Sacked editor takes new post

Janice Hopkins Tanne, *New York*

Dr George Lundberg, who was fired after 17 years as editor of *JAMA* (the journal of the American Medical Association), has been named editor in chief of Medscape, a leading internet site.

He told the *BMJ* he is considering "creation of a primary source, web only, peer reviewed general medical journal of high scientific quality. Medscape does not have that at this time, nor does anyone else."

Dr Lundberg was dismissed last month for fast tracking the publication of an article indicating that American university students did not consider oral sex to be "real sex."

Dr Lundberg's appointment as editor in chief of Medscape was due to be announced at a press conference in New York on Wednesday 24 February, as the *BMJ* went to press. Medscape (www.medscape.com), which was founded in 1995 and is based in New York city, is a free site with

more than one million registered members including doctors, other healthcare providers, and consumers. "I have responsibility for the quality of editorial content for the entire Medscape site. My reputation is based on the integrity of the product," Dr Lundberg said. He added that he had been guaranteed editorial independence.

Although Dr Lundberg said that he had been approached by many organisations after his dismissal from *JAMA*, he chose to go from print to electronic media because "The future is now. The internet is the single most important advance in human communication since the printing press. It's not constrained by political boundaries or geographic boundaries."

The Medscape site covers 18 specialty areas and provides next day summaries of conferences and medical meetings, continuing medical education programmes, and interactive treatment guides for doctors.

Medscape also publishes five peer reviewed electronic journals, contains a drug and disease database, and provides access to Medline and other databases of

the National Library of Medicine. It has exclusive rights to nearly 100 medical journals. The website, like medical journals, is supported by advertising.

Dr Lundberg told the *Chicago Tribune* on 17 February about the pressures he had faced as editor of *JAMA*: "I don't think a day went by in considering what to publish that I and my editorial staff didn't have to worry about offending AMA [American Medical Association] members, AMA politicians, and the AMA Washington office by what we published."

He told the newspaper that AMA officers and members and state medical societies threatened "political action against the editor and the journal for publishing what offended them ideologically, or more likely impinged on [doctors'] ability to earn money."

Dr Lundberg had published articles critical of doctors doing tests in their offices, where errors were more likely than in hospital or reference laboratories.

He asserted that "the editor's job is to edit the journal for patients" and to provide data for public policy debates. □

Newborns prescribed drugs only tested in adults

Caroline White, *London*

Many of the drugs used to treat neonates and children have been tested only in adults, forcing doctors and pharmacists to calculate the appropriate, safe doses themselves, new research shows.

Ninety per cent of patients in a neonatal intensive care unit in the east Midlands were given drugs that were either unlicensed or used in ways other than those for which they had been tested—termed "off label use".

Only just over one third of prescriptions given to the 70 babies admitted over 13 weeks were for licensed drugs used in a licensed way, the research showed, including nine of the 10 most commonly prescribed drugs in neonatal intensive care (*Archives of Disease in Childhood* (fetal and neonatal edition) 1991;80:142-4F). This highlights the inadequacies of the current

licensing framework in the United Kingdom, say the authors.

"One or several paediatric research units across the country should be funded to set up innovative, non-invasive drug trials, which will encourage parents to participate," said Sharon Conroy, from the academic division of

child health, University of Nottingham, and lead author of the study. "In the United States the government has taken this very seriously and set up several units along these lines, with several trials in children funded by the National Institutes of Health."

In May the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health will publish *Medicines for Children*, the first drugs formulary for children, which will be accompanied by a working party report on the licensed and unlicensed use of drugs in children. □

Children will have their own drugs formulary in May

News extra **BMJ**

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