Free eye tests introduced for people over 60 in England and Wales

Mark Pownall, *London*

People over the age of 60 in England and Wales are now entitled to free eye tests, the Department of Health announced last week, 10 years after charges were first introduced for this service.

This means that seven million people in England and Wales can now have eye tests paid for by the NHS. Similar arrangements are being made for people living in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Announcing the new service, the secretary of state for health, Frank Dobson said: "This will save sight. Eye tests pick up potentially blinding conditions such as glaucoma and diabetic eye disease." The measure was welcomed by the Royal National Institute for the Blind, which estimated that 500 000 older people have not been having eye tests because of the cost.

The withdrawal of the right to free eye tests from the general population in April 1989, which had been available under the NHS since its inception in 1948,

Frank Dobson announces free sight checks for people over 60

caused a storm of protest. Tests have remained free only for children, those with low incomes, and people at high risk of eye disease.

Critics warned at the time that the £13-20 (\$20-32) that optometrists charge for a basic eye test would act as a deterrent, and Department of Health figures have shown that the total number of eye tests (both NHS

and private) has fallen. The warning also seems to have been borne out by the results of a survey of 1445 people over the age of 60 which was carried out for the Royal National Institute for the Blind. Results showed a progressive increase since 1989 in the proportion of people leaving an interval of up to five years between eye tests. People in the wealthier social class groups were much more likely to have had an eye test within the previous two years—the recommended maximum interval between tests for people over 60—according to the survey. Twenty five per cent of those surveyed had not had a test in the previous two years, and about 1 in 10 had not had an eye test in the previous five years or more.

The Royal National Institute for the Blind is calling for free eye checks for other high risk groups. In particular, it wants free tests for people of African and Afro-Caribbean origin, who have four times the glaucoma risk of people in the general population. □

Health project targets women and children in Indonesia

Adam Easton, *Manila*

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a \$300m (£188m) loan to finance a health and nutrition project for pregnant women and children affected by the economic crisis in Indonesia.

Indonesia has been particularly affected by prolonged recession, which has caused high unemployment, inflation, food shortages, and rioting in urban areas. Bill Fraser, manager of the ADB's education, health, and population division, warned: "Families, particularly urban households, are much worse off than they were a year ago. The poor are less able to provide adequate nutrition and cannot afford medical care if they become ill."

The project represents a continuation of a broader social protection development programme started last year in response to the financial crisis. One aspect highlighted by the programme was that health and nutrition

were not receiving the attention they deserved, particularly in urban areas, where residents had fewer funds to purchase limited food supplies, said Mr Fraser. It became clear that inadequate resources were being made available to pregnant women and infants, and an increased occurrence of anaemia as well as iodine and vitamin A deficiency were reported. The crisis has also exacerbated inequities in Indonesian households where, traditionally, women and girls receive less food.

The programme, which is to receive a further \$300m from Japan's Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund, aims to ensure that health centres continue to function and maintain supplies of essential drugs, vaccines, and consumable supplies. It will also reinforce family planning programmes and provide basic nutrition for pregnant women and infants up to the age of two years. The project also hopes to strengthen programmes to control communicable diseases including malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhoea. "There is a growing risk of severe malnutrition and a resurgence of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis because of weakened resistance," reported Mr Fraser. □

Endostatin may stop the progression of atherosclerosis

Scott Gottlieb, *New York*

The experimental drug endostatin, which is being developed for its ability to shrink cancerous tumours by inhibiting the development of new blood vessels, is also showing promise in stopping atherosclerosis.

Researchers have found that endostatin significantly reduced atherosclerosis in genetically susceptible mice. In the 16 week experiment which involved 73 mice, the researchers tested endostatin as well as TNP-470, another substance known to inhibit the growth of capillaries, in animals fed a high cholesterol diet. Animals that had been treated with one of the two drugs had 70% to 85% less plaque deposition in their aortas than those that were untreated (*Circulation* 1999;99:1726-32).

The inhibitors had much less effect if they were given too early (before the plaques reached substantial size and needed new blood vessels to grow further) or too late (after the plaques were mature).

Endostatin is a naturally occurring protein that blocks the formation of blood vessels. Without a blood supply tumours in animals stop growing and sometimes regress completely.

Atherosclerotic heart disease also involves unwanted tissue growth. "By blocking this perhaps we can alter the progression of the disease," said Dr Moulton. In addition, cutting off the blood supply from a plaque may reduce the likelihood that the plaque will eventually rupture. However, she pointed out that further research will be needed to determine whether treatment with angiogenesis inhibitors in people at high risk of heart disease can affect the development of large atherosclerotic deposits. □

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