In brief

UK delays ban on tobacco advertisements: The UK government is to delay the imposition of a total ban on tobacco advertising for almost three years. Billboard and magazine advertisements will be outlawed on 10 December; retailers will have until March 2000 to take down shopfront signs; mailshots attached to cigarette packets will end in July 2000; and advertising in EU publications sold in Britain will end in July 2002.

England has new chief nursing officer: Sarah Mullahy will succeed Dame Yvonne Moores as chief nursing officer for England. She is currently director of nursing and quality and deputy chief executive at Chelsea and Westminster Healthcare NHS Trust in London.

Israel and UK link up on research: The United Kingdom and Israel will invest £15.5m (\$24.8m) over the next three years on medical and scientific research and development projects, with the aim of bringing patented products to European and world markets. When the BRITISH Foundation identifies a proposal as having high marketable potential, the fund will finance the project up to 50%.

UK GPs are ill equipped for mental health problems: Research by the Mental Health Care Association has found that GPs are spending almost a third of their time on mental health problems in patients, but many feel ill equipped to help. Almost a third of the 325 GPs surveyed said that they had no interest in the subject.

Rate of syphilis in US falls: The rate of syphilis in the United States in 1998 was the lowest recorded. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that the national rate of new cases was 2.6 per 100 000 population and was concentrated in 28 of the country's 3000 counties.

News **extra**
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Patients' complaints: GMC could do better

Linda Beecham *BMJ*

The General Medical Council (GMC) needs to improve the quality of its customer care if it is to retain public trust, according to a survey conducted by *Health Which?* (October 1999).

After advertising in national newspapers for complainants the magazine surveyed the experiences of 264 patients who had contacted the GMC about a complaint. In only six of these cases was any action taken against a doctor. Eighty two per cent said that they were dissatisfied with the fairness of the process and 85% were left with a more negative impression of the council as a result of their experience.

The complainants said that they went to the council because they wanted formal recognition that a mistake had been made or wanted action to prevent the same thing from happening again. Only 27% said that they wanted the doctor to be struck off the register.

Over half the people said that they were given insufficient information about how to proceed with a complaint. After an initial contact with the council, 51 people decided not to submit a complaint. They thought that their complaint would not have been dealt with fairly, that the process seemed too complicated, or that submitting a complaint would cost too much.

No one whose complaint was rejected after the initial screening procedure was satisfied with this outcome. "The GMC is there to protect doctors not to do justice," one person said. This perception is not helped by the fact that the doctor sees the patient's complaint and can respond, but complainants do not normally see the response.

Health Which? recommends that there should be more lay people on the council (only a quarter of the members are non-

medical); everyone should get the same information about the complaints procedures when they contact the GMC; the public should be given clearer guidance about when to refer a complaint to the council and when to use the NHS complaints procedure; target times should be set by which the council would acknowledge receipt of a complaint and investigate it; complainants should get regular progress reports and be able to see a doctor's response to their complaint; and complainants should be told that they can ask to remain anonymous during a public hearing.

Complaints against doctors have trebled over the past five years, up to a total of about 3000 in 1998. And in its response to the survey a spokesman for the council said, "We recognise that we have not always been customer friendly."

The council has agreed that all complainants should receive the same information about the procedures and where to turn to for advice. The council said that it was working with the NHS Executive on how to improve information about complaints procedures. □

JAMA appoints woman editor

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

JAMA, the journal of the American Medical Association (AMA), appointed a new editor—the first woman and the first paediatrician in its 116 year history—and pledged to maintain strict independence for the publication's editorial process.

"Editorial freedom is essential," said Dr Catherine DeAngelis, a dean of academic affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, in Baltimore, Maryland, and current editor in chief of the association's *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*.

"It is the absolute byword by which I will operate," she said at a news conference where her appointment was announced. "If I had any doubts, I wouldn't be standing here."

The appointment of Dr DeAngelis begins a new chapter in *JAMA*'s leadership after the controversial firing earlier this year of her predecessor, Dr

George Lundberg. The AMA was roundly criticised for hastily dismissing Dr Lundberg last January after some in the organisation's leadership accused him of publishing a paper on perceptions about sex to influence President Clinton's impeachment trial.

The dismissal fuelled a controversy over the journal's editorial independence. In a response to public criticism over Lundberg's firing, *JAMA* established a seven member oversight committee to

serve as a buffer or wall of separation between *JAMA*'s editorial process and the AMA's officials.

The committee's rules also say that the association "recognises and fully accepts the necessity of editorial independence for the editor-in-chief at all times."

Dr Lundberg, who is now editor in chief of Medscape.com, a medical information website, said that he thinks Dr DeAngelis will help to maintain *JAMA*'s journalistic integrity. □

Dr Catherine DeAngelis takes questions at a New York press conference to announce her appointment as editor of *JAMA*