In brief

US bill bans execution of pregnant prisoners: The US House of Representatives has unanimously passed a bill banning the execution of all pregnant prisoners. The US, as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, has been prohibited since 1994 from executing pregnant women convicted of a federal crime. The new bill extends the protection to include pregnant women convicted of state crimes.

Public to be consulted on folic acid: The UK health departments and the Food Standards Agency have launched a public consultation on whether to fortify wheat flour with folic acid. The Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy has said that adding folic acid would reduce the risk of neural tube defects in babies by 41%.

Head of Shipman inquiry steps down: Lord Laming, who was appointed to head the inquiry into Harold Shipman, who was jailed for life in January for killing 15 of his female patients, has resigned to meet other commitments. He said that a public inquiry, called for by the victims' relatives, would take longer than he had expected.

British university given grant for malaria research: The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine has received a grant of £26.6m (\$39.9m) for its malaria research and prevention programme from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The money should help to achieve the G8 commitment of halving child mortality from malaria by 2010.

Greece wants to stop its drugs being sold abroad: The Greek health minister has said that the health system will be reformed to stop large quantities of drugs from state hospitals being sold in neighbouring countries.

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Elderly people will get free nursing care

Linda Beecham *BMJ*

Elderly people in nursing homes in England will receive free nursing care from October 2001. In its response to the Royal Commission on Long Term Care, the government accepted that nursing care in nursing homes should be treated the same as care elsewhere in the NHS—free at the point of use. The necessary legislation will be introduced this year.

An estimated 35 000 people in nursing homes are expected to save up to £5000 a year on their current bills. The government has rejected, however, the commission's call for all personal care to be free too.

From April 2001 the value of a person's house will no longer be taken into account in the means testing rules in the first three months after admission to residential and nursing homes. Local authorities will be given a new grant to expand loan schemes to ensure that elderly people will not be forced to sell their

Rising numbers of elderly to get more from the NHS

homes against their will when they go into long term care. In addition, the government plans to expand intermediate care and rehabilitation services for elderly people. By 2004 spending on new services and facilities will rise to £900m (\$1350m) a year.

The government hopes to reduce bed blocking of acute hospital beds by introducing an extra 5000 intermediate care beds and extra rapid

response teams to prevent unnecessary hospital admissions. This should benefit an extra 70 000 people a year. A national director for services for older people will be appointed in the autumn to lead the programme. □

The NHS Plan: The Government's Response to the Royal Commission on Long Term Care is available from the Stationery Office, price £7, or at www.nhs.uk/nhsplan

Plan leaves England "with third division" health service

Rhona MacDonald *BMJ*

England will remain in the third division of the world's health systems in 2004 despite the government's new reform programme for the NHS, according to Ian Bogle, the chairman of the BMA's council. He also criticised the government for proposing to prohibit private practice among new consultants after they have fulfilled their NHS commitment, saying that this "could drive doctors out of the NHS, further exacerbating workforce problems."

Dr Peter Hawker, the chairman of the BMA's Central Consultants and Specialists Committee, accused the government of a "profound lack of understanding for the work that consultants do." He said that Alan Milburn, the secretary of

state for health, had completely changed his mind over private practice in a month, adding: "How can he have changed his mind in such a short time?"

Andrew Hobart, chairman of the BMA's Junior Doctors Committee, said: "The threat to introduce a subconsultant grade if the profession does not agree to restrictions on consultants' private practice smacks of bullying."

The BMA's General Practitioners Committee and the Royal College of General Practitioners said that the proposed 1.6% increase in the number of GPs was inadequate. Dr Simon Fradd, the joint deputy chairman of the General Practitioners Committee, said: "It's hard to see how this relatively small

increase in numbers will enable us to cope with the current increase in demand." The proposed new Personal Medical Services contract was also criticised. Dr Fradd said: "The reason general practice has worked so well for the NHS and been so cost effective is that GPs have put patient care above everything else and developed a system that works well. Now the government says it wants us to move from this tried and tested model in favour of a new unevaluated way of working."

Many organisations welcomed the plan's focus on patients. The Patients Forum praised the government for this and for involving patients in the planning and provision of services. Barbara Meredith, a member of one of the government's modernisation action teams, said that the challenge was now for all professionals and patients to come together to make new ideas work. □