In brief

English hospitals to have “do not resuscitate” plans: Hospitals in England have been told to draw up policies on when patients should or should not be resuscitated. This proposal was in *The NHS Plan* published in July, and the Department of Health has this week issued guidance to NHS trusts.

Royal college recognises voluntary work: The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has agreed to grant professional recognition to doctors who take placements with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). For the first time, 10 trainee consultant paediatricians will be able to include a year as a VSO volunteer as part of their training. Further information at www.rcpch.ac.uk/.

US scientists observe new action of statins: Simvastatin seems to promote the growth of new blood vessels in vitro and in animals, says a team from Tufts University. They hypothesised that the drug stimulates protein kinase Akt/PKB, a molecule which sits in endothelial cells. This in turn activates nitric oxide synthase, which switches on angiogenesis and may explain why statins are protective in people with cardiovascular disease but who have normal cholesterol levels (*Nature Medicine* 2000;6:1004-10).

Police clear MP of euthanasia: A police investigation, launched after the Isle of Wight MP Dr Peter Brand, a GP, told the Commons that he had allowed a patient to die, has found no evidence of any criminal offence.

US university pays \$12m in fraud settlement: The University of Pennsylvania has agreed to pay \$12m (£8.5m) to settle claims that one of its medical centres fraudulently billed Medicare for patients watching television and eating lunch.

US bans marijuana for medicinal purposes: The US Supreme Court has overturned a federal ruling in San Francisco that would have allowed a cannabis buyers' cooperative to distribute the drug for medicinal purposes (29 July, p 261).

Indian doctors not accountable, says consumer report

Ganapati Mudur *New Delhi*

A consumer advocacy group in India has said that patients claiming damages for medical negligence are often unable to prove their allegations because doctors are unwilling to testify against other doctors.

“The complainants cannot muster evidence to prove negligence beyond doubt,” said the Voluntary Organisation in Interest of Consumer Education in New Delhi after a survey conducted in three cities.

The survey examined grievance redress mechanisms in 81 large hospitals and small clinics and studied 86 cases of alleged medical negligence filed in consumer courts in three large Indian cities—Delhi, Hyderabad, and Lucknow.

The cases included allegations of medical negligence that led to death, permanent physical

injury, or multiple operations. In one case, for example, a woman had claimed that the doctor had performed cataract surgery on the wrong eye.

The study, supported by the Indian health ministry and the World Bank, showed that more than half the hospitals surveyed did not have mechanisms to manage complaints from patients or their relatives.

Patients usually turned to consumer courts only after trying to resolve their grievances with their doctors or hospitals, according to the study, which will be published later this month.

The Indian Supreme Court ruled in 1995 that doctors could be sued in India's consumer courts, which are intended to offer a speedy alternative to civil courts.

The Indian Medical Association had unsuccessfully campaigned against the inclusion of medical services under the consumer protection act on the grounds that medical services could not be equated with other consumer transactions.

Although the court had also ordered a penalty of 10 000 rupees (£150; \$225) on those who file frivolous or false cases against doctors, members of the Indian Medical Association have said they do not consider this to be a significant deterrent.

“But patients are clearly at a disadvantage because of lack of on-the-record testimony by doctors and also lack of relevant medical documents,” said Bejon Misra, lead investigator in the survey and adviser with the Voluntary Organisation in Interest of Consumer Education.

The Central Consumer Protection Council has periodically urged the Indian health ministry to make it mandatory for all hospitals to provide medical records to patients. “Our survey shows this is not happening,” Mr Misra said. □

Israeli doctors angry at change to complaints' procedures

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich *Jerusalem*

Responsibility for investigating Israelis' complaints against doctors will be shifted from committees appointed by the health ministry to a special justice ministry panel, Israel's new health minister, Roni Milo, announced less than three weeks after he took office.

Mr Milo, a lawyer by training, did not consult with officials in the Israel Medical Association before making his decision, and informed the justice minister only 10 minutes before his announcement.

The new panel will not only investigate complaints but will also decide if a doctor has been negligent and whether he or she should be punished.

Until now, the health minister has had the sole responsibility for deciding the professional fate of doctors accused of negli-

Israeli health minister, Roni Milo: “shooting from the hip”

gence, and could take decisions completely at variance with disciplinary boards' recommendations. An appeal against the minister's decision could be made only before Israel's Supreme Court.

The health ministry's committees have a record of dismissing a high proportion of patients' complaints. In 1999 the ministry's committees dismissed 765 out of 792 complaints. The comparable figures for 1997 and 1998 were 602/615 and 700/715 respectively.

When Mr Milo served as police minister several years ago, he ordered that investigations of complaints against policemen be handled by the justice ministry, and not by an internal committee of the Israel police. This decision was welcomed by the public, and now as health minister, he has decided to adopt the same technique for complaints against doctors.

Although changes would require legislation to be pushed through the Knesset (parliament), Mr Milo said that he would immediately refuse to change the recommendations of doctors' committees that investigated complaints.

Lawyers representing patients have repeatedly complained that senior doctors are reluctant to testify as experts in order to protect colleagues under investigation or merely as a collegial courtesy.

The minister's announcement shocked and amazed doctors' groups. “It's unthinkable that such reform can be carried out by shooting from the hip,” commented the Israel Medical Association's chairman, Dr Yoram Blachar. □

Full story in News Extra at bmj.com