In brief

Sexually transmitted infections rise again in the Netherlands:

Public health bodies in the Netherlands are alarmed at the latest figures from the Royal Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM). A 21% rise in sexually transmitted infections in 2001 follows a 16% rise in 2000. The highest rises are in women (gonorrhoea, 60% rise; chlamydia, 49%). Details are at RIVM.Reports@rivm.nl

US plans to vaccinate 500 000 health workers against smallpox:

In a major policy change, the US federal government has decided to vaccinate about 500 000 healthcare and emergency workers against smallpox, says an article in the *New York Times* (3 July, p A1). In June the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's advisory committee on immunisation practices had recommended limited vaccination (to a few thousand health workers) (29 June, p 1540).

FDA rules that water containing nicotine is a drug:

The US Food and Drug Administration has ruled that nicotine spiked water, which has been heavily advertised as a smoking cessation aide since its introduction in May 2002, is a drug and not a dietary supplement. The water contains 2-4 mg of nicotine per 16 ounce (454 g) bottle. The drinks must be removed from the market immediately.

Survey of NHS cancer patients published:

The findings of the first national survey of NHS patients with cancer, which canvassed the views of 65 000 patients, were published last week. It showed that substantial numbers of patients did not receive written information at the time of diagnosis. The report can be accessed at www.doh.gov.uk/nhspatients/cancersurvey

European Union tackles work related stress:

The European Union's Agency for Safety and Health at Work has launched a campaign to raise awareness among employers and staff of the dangers of work related stress. More details can be accessed at: <http://osha.eu.int/ew2002>.

Hopes rise for patients with drug resistant HIV

Alex Vass *BMJ*

New treatments may soon be available for patients with HIV which has become resistant to existing treatments.

The results are from completed phase III trials of a new category of anti-HIV drug called "fusion inhibitors." The results show that twice as many patients using the first fusion inhibitor, T-20, in combination with antiretroviral drugs, achieved reductions in their viral load to below detectable levels, compared with patients taking antiretroviral drugs alone.

Significant improvements in immune cell (CD4) counts were also seen in patients taking the fusion inhibitor.

The results came on the first day of the 14th international AIDS conference in Barcelona.

Dr Jacob Lalezari, a principal investigator, called them "the most exciting advance since pro-

tease inhibitors were introduced." The addition of T-20 to conventional treatment had, he said, "brought people who had become resistant to current drugs back from the edge."

The average patient in the trial had received 12 previous antiretrovirals over the last eight years.

Fusion inhibitors are one of three distinct classes of anti-HIV compounds, collectively known as entry inhibitors, being investigated. They work to block HIV before it enters the cell, whereas currently available drugs work by preventing replication of HIV after it has infected a cell.

New categories of anti-HIV drugs are needed to combat the growing problem of antiretroviral resistance. In 1997 just 3.3% of patients were resistant to all classes of antiretroviral. In 2000 a study in the United

States showed that over a quarter of patients were resistant to all three classes of antiretroviral drug.

Dr Anton Pozniak, a consultant at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, speaking at the disclosure of the results, said that levels of drug resistance are likely to reach 42% by 2005.

"While we wait for a therapeutic vaccine, drugs that will work against resistant viruses have to be developed," he said.

T-20, given twice daily by subcutaneous injection, is expected to be licensed later this year and to become commercially available early next year, said Dr Dani Bolognesi, chief executive of Trimeris. The price of the drug, he said, "had not been discussed."

The trial results came the day after Dr Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS, told thousands of conference delegates that the AIDS battle must be fought on the global political stage.

"The answers are political. They are about power and priorities," he said. □

GPs should use nurses more to lighten their load

Samena Chaudhry *London*

Small changes could have a big impact on the quality of care of patients and the efficiency of general practice, a new report from the Audit Commission says.

Such changes include increased use of practice nurses and nurse practitioners, more telephone consultations, and encouraging GPs with special interests to work across several practices.

The report says that despite receiving only a fifth of NHS spending, general practices are highly rated by the public and have changed "beyond recognition" in the last 50 years. Practices have evolved from a "cottage industry" to a team of diverse professionals in large premises offering a wide range of services.

It acknowledges that although some practices are already showing the benefits of

such changes, building on current improvements requires proper resources. While spending on general medical services has increased in real terms by 20% in the last 10 years, spending on hospitals has increased by more than 60%.

GPs feel under pressure from the increasing complexity of the workload. They also have to deal with new clinical standards, rising expectations, and wider social needs, as more work is being shifted out of hospitals.

The report states that the potential for nurses to take on

some of the workload of GPs has not been realised. It describes this use of nurses as a "missed opportunity" and that nurses should be "skilled generalists providing the first point of contact for patients with undifferentiated needs."

It also says more use should be made of the bank of GPs working in non-principal posts, such as locums, salaried doctors, and part time doctors. □

A Focus on General Practice in England 2002 is available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/publications/