other factors should be involved," said Dr Jo Ivey Boufford, dean of the Robert F Wagner Graduate School of Public Health, New York University, and co-chairwoman of the committee that produced the report.

Compared with 1900, "by every measure we are healthier, live longer and enjoy lives less likely to be marked by injury, ill health or premature death," says the report.

But in terms of life expectancy the United States lags behind most other comparable nations, and the country ranks 28th in infant mortality among 39 industrialised nations. Compared with 30 other countries, the United States has the highest incidence of all cancers. In the World Health Organization's assessment of health systems around the world, the United States is ranked 37th.

Recent events in the United States, such as the anthrax scare and the threat of bioterrorism, have shown up weaknesses in the public health system. In 1988 the Institute of Medicine issued a report on the public health, saying that it was "in serious disarray." The latest report shows that 14 years later this is still the case.

Dr Boufford says that the solution lies in organising "public policies and political will, and we have not yet been able to mobilise these effectively."

Charles Marwick *Washington, DC*

The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century is available for purchase at the institute's website, www.iom.edu

Australians set up a mental health first aid course

Researchers in Canberra have set up a first aid course in mental health to raise public awareness of mental health issues.

"The aim is to help people recognise the early warning signals of mental illness and to know how they can help in these early stages," explains Betty Kitchener, of the Australian National University's centre for mental health research.

A survey evaluation of the course published this month in

BMC Psychiatry (2002;2:10) reports that the first 210 trainees felt they better understood mental health issues and were more confident in helping someone with mental illness.

The scheme, set up by Kitchener in February 2002, was government funded initially but has been run on a fee for service basis since July. More than 1500 people, including teachers, police, and personnel staff, have now been through the course, and there are plans to extend it throughout Australia over the next two years.

Natasha Gilbert *London*

More information on the course is available at www.mhfa.com.au

Coroner cites football as reason for brain injury

The English Football Association and the Professional Footballers' Association are conducting a 10 year study into how heading a ball can affect the brain.

It comes as a coroner's court ruled that professional footballer Jeff Astle, who died earlier this year at age 59, was likely to have had trauma to the front of his brain as a result of regularly heading the ball—something for which he was famous. He played for West Bromwich Albion until his retirement in 1977 and was part of England's 1970 World Cup team.

South Staffordshire's coroner, Andrew Heigh, recorded a verdict of "death by industrial disease" on the former striker. Dr Heigh said: "The trauma caused to the front of his brain is likely to have had a considerable effect on the cause of death."

Mr Astle had been in poor health since 1997 because of an eating disorder and was eventually unable to recognise his children.

Derek Robson, the consultant neuropathologist at the Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham, told the inquest that Mr Astle had a brain condition that was likely to have been exacerbated by heading leather footballs.

Lynn Eaton *London*

Deadly parasitic disease grips southern Sudan

Anne Gulland *London*

Doctors are calling on drug companies and research institutes to develop a cheaper and more effective treatment for kala azar—a disease that is devastating the war torn population of southern Sudan.

The aid agency Médecins Sans Frontières warned that kala azar, also known as visceral leishmaniasis, was nearing epidemic levels among the malnourished population of Sudan, which has seen two decades of civil war.

The agency, which has a clinic in Lankien in the Eastern Upper Nile state, has received more than 100 admissions a week over the last six weeks. In October alone the clinic saw 432 cases.

Doctors are treating patients, who sometimes travel for days or weeks on foot to reach the clinic, with out of date and toxic drugs. Jose Antonio Bastos, the agency's operational director for Sudan, said: "It's shameful we are treating a deadly disease with a very toxic drug that comes from the 1950s. We're putting pressure on the pharmaceutical industry for research for [cheap] drugs and diagnostic tests for kala azar."

A highly effective drug, AmBisome (amphotericin encapsulated in liposomes), is available but costs around \$2000 (£1260; €1970) for a course of treatment.

Sudan saw an epidemic of kala azar in 1989, and Dr Bastos said he "did not dare" call the current outbreak an epidemic yet. What is clear, however, is that aid workers had never seen so many cases in such a small place.

Dr Bastos said that the high number of cases was probably linked to the effects of the war. "There is a clear overlap of those areas where kala azar is endemic and areas of conflict. Insecurity, malnutrition, and poor access to health care lower the people's natural resistance to diseases and make for an environment where outbreaks like the current one occur."

Kala azar is a parasitic disease transmitted by a sandfly present in acacia trees and termite mounds. The disease, like HIV infection, is immunosuppressive, and it attacks the spleen, enlarging it and causing anaemia and blood loss.

However, with the 17 day course of treatment administered by agency staff, patients can make a full recovery, and the clinic at Lankien has just a 6% mortality.

British GP Simon Burling, who has just returned from nine months at the Lankien clinic, said that the main problem was the toxicity of current drugs. "The drugs are very painful, and side effects include vomiting and kidney failure," he said. □

A child undergoes splenic aspiration so doctors can obtain a sample for diagnosis of kala azar