In brief

Royal Society investigates science research: The United Kingdom's Royal Society has launched an investigation into the way scientific research is made public. The working group will also consider the peer review process, which does not always guard against some papers being published that later are shown to be based on false or poorly interpreted results. See www.royalsoc.ac.uk

Government to cover bribes: Slovakia plans to introduce supplementary insurance to cover payments that patients make to the doctors treating them to assure good service. Slovaks reportedly pay an average of 2200 crowns (£37; \$60, €53) a year to medical staff for preferential treatment.

Video shows aid worker alive: International medical relief organisation Médecins Sans Frontières has confirmed that a recent video has been received showing that its kidnapped aid worker, Dutchman Arjan Erkel, is alive. A series of demonstrations were due to mark the first anniversary of his kidnapping in the Russian republic of Dagestan (*BMJ* 2002;325:406).

US company fined for unnecessary treatment: Tenet Healthcare has agreed to pay \$54m (£34m; €48m) in response to government allegations that doctors at a northern Californian hospital did unnecessary cardiac procedures and surgery on hundreds of patients. Tenet signalled that it would rather pay a record fine than go to court.

Ban on advertisements lifted: The UK is to lift its ban on the advertising of some over the counter medicines to the public. Restrictions will be removed for drugs for cardiovascular, bone, liver, biliary system, and pancreatic diseases, as well as for serious respiratory and kidney diseases. The ban on advertising prescription-only medicines will remain.

News extra
bmj.com For more news stories, see the BMJ's website

Claims by charity exaggerate dangers of osteoporosis

Ray Moynihan *Washington, DC*

The organisers of Australia's "healthy bones week" have come under fire for making exaggerated and misleading claims about the dangers of osteoporosis—the loss of bone density that raises the risk of fracture with age.

"Fact 1" on a poster sent to Australian general practitioners last week read: "More Australian women die from osteoporosis than all female cancers combined." There was no reference to back up the statement, and a search has been unable to find any evidence to support it. Sydney general practitioner Mark Donohoe, a government adviser on false health claims whose surgery was sent the poster, described the claim as "patent rubbish" and a "bald faced lie."

The Australian Bureau of Statistics ranks cancer as the leading cause of death, responsible for almost 28% of all deaths. Osteoporosis is not listed in the top 12 causes of death or the top 10 chronic conditions.

When contacted for com-

ment the charity, Osteoporosis Australia, at first defended the claim but after further questioning conceded it had been "poorly written." A correction is soon to be sent to general practitioners, and advertisements clarifying the "fact" will be placed in medical magazines.

The false claim that more women die from osteoporosis than cancer was a distortion of another "fact" being promoted by Osteoporosis Australia, co-sponsor of healthy bones week with Dairy Australia, that mortality in women from hip fracture was "greater than the incidence of all female cancers combined."

According to Dr Donohoe this is a meaningless statement because it compares the death rate in a particular group of women who are at higher risk of death anyway with the chances for all women of getting cancer. Professor David Henry, from the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, said it is like comparing apples and donkeys.

Exaggerating the size or severity of a medical condition is a common feature of many disease awareness activities backed by drug companies, although this may be an extreme case. Other examples include campaigns sponsored by drug companies claiming that a million Australians have a psychiatric condition called social phobia, 40% of men suffer from problems with erections, and almost one in two women have a condition called female sexual dysfunction (*BMJ* 2003;326:45-7).

Just two months ago a specialist in pharmaceutical marketing described how drug companies were now routinely involved not only in raising awareness but in fostering the creation of new diseases. An article in the May issue of *Medical Marketing and Media*, (2003;38:43-49), explains how companies helped create panic disorder, erectile dysfunction, and premenstrual dysphoric disorder to build bigger markets for their pills. The article was written by Vince Parry, chief branding officer at InChord, a network of marketing companies with 500 employees. □

US army investigates unrelated pneumonia cases in troops in Iraq

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

The US army is ruling out biological or chemical weapons as the source of a wave of cases of pneumonia among troops in Iraq, according to the Pentagon.

From 1 March to 30 July about 100 cases of pneumonia were reported among US sol-

diers deployed in Iraq and other countries in the region, and military doctors have not been able to determine the cause of the disease in most of the cases. There is no evidence that the disease has been passed from one person to another.

In 15 of the cases the pneumonia was severe enough to require intubation. Ten of those cases occurred in Iraq, where most troops are deployed. The others occurred in Kuwait, Qatar, and Uzbekistan. Two soldiers have died, both of whom served in Iraq. No British troops have been affected by the illness, according to the Pentagon.

The army has assigned two teams of medical investigators to determine the cause of the pneumonia. Epidemiologists investigating the illness are focusing on environmental factors such as dust and dehydration, as they have ruled out severe acute respiratory syndrome, legionnaires' disease, anthrax, smallpox, and other infectious agents as a cause of the illness.

The pneumonia is said to resemble an inflammatory reaction. Army doctors have speculated that it is the result of irritation, perhaps from dust. Soldiers who smoke local Iraqi cigarettes that lack filters are believed to be at highest risk of developing the pneumonia. □

US troops before a raid in Iraq

EPAPPA