In brief

Scottish antibullying helpline launched: Parents, teachers, and young people needing help to combat bullying can call a new telephone helpline set up by the University of Edinburgh and funded by the Scottish executive. The helpline (0131 651 6100) will be staffed during term time from 9 30 am to 12 30 pm and from 2 pm to 4 pm. (See editorial on p 330, and papers on pp 344 and 348.)

UK anaesthetist jailed for manslaughter: A consultant anaesthetist who admitted the manslaughter of a teenage boy who died during a routine tooth extraction in a dental surgery was jailed for six months last week. Dr Prabhakar Gadgil, aged 65, gave Bradley Miller, aged 14, of Darton, near Barnsley, South Yorkshire, nitrous oxide instead of oxygen during the procedure. Mr Justice Poole sentenced Dr Gadgil to six months in prison and ordered him to pay £12 500 (\$20 000) in costs. The anaesthetist, who was suspended from his post at Barnsley General Hospital, has since retired.

GMC guidance faces patients' watchdog challenge: Forthcoming guidance from the General Medical Council on confidentiality and the use of patients' records may be challenged in the High Court in London. The statutory patients' watchdog body, the Association of Community Health Councils for England and Wales, has obtained an opinion from Richard Gordon QC, which states that the guidance is unlawful as it contravenes the European Convention on Human Rights and the European directive on data protection.

Vasectomy in Down's syndrome man blocked: The High Court in London has refused to give the go ahead for a vasectomy to be performed in a man with Down's syndrome without the man's consent. The man's 63 year old mother asked Mr Justice Sumner last week to rule that the operation would be in her son's best interests and could therefore be carried out despite his inability to give valid consent.

US National Institutes of Health updates peer review system

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

The peer review system governing grant applications to the US National Institutes of Health is set to be updated over the next two years, with the aim of encouraging more innovative research.

A report published last week by a panel chaired by Dr Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences, recommended changes to take advantage of opportunities in biomedical research and to keep pace with new research methods (*Science* 1999;285:666-7). Dr Keith Yamamoto, chairman of the Advisory Committee of the National Institute of Health's Center for Scientific Review and chairman of the department of cellular and molecular pharmacology at the University of California in San Francisco, told the *BMJ* that the panel's aims were to bring the review system in line with rapid advances in science, reduce conservatism, encourage

risk taking, involve outside experts, and continually review the process itself. The report commented: "Many researchers fear that conservatism ... and an undue requirement for preliminary data discourage innovation. In practice, the present system tends to discourage risk-taking and under-value new ideas."

The National Institutes of Health is the leading funder of biomedical research in the United States, providing \$15.6bn (£9.7bn) this year for studies aiming to improve human health and train young scientists. Three quarters of the 40 000 annual grant applications go through peer review at its Center for Scientific Review, headed by Dr Ellie Ehrenfeld, who indicated problem areas.

The current approval procedures for grant applications were considered to be deficient on several levels. Grant applica-

tions are currently referred to integrated review groups, but no appropriate groups exist for some of the newest research fields. Applications for potentially important work may be assigned to several different study sections, "causing too much of 'the best science' to compete with itself," suggested the report.

The proposal suggests that peer reviewers should not be advocates or gatekeepers for a field; they need not be competitors of the applicant or even studying the same disease or organ system but should be "experienced researchers who are reasonably diverse in seniority, outlook, geographical location, gender, and ethnicity." Dr Yamamoto commented: "There is concern about an old boy network but also about not taking advantage of experienced researchers. The younger investigators don't have the breadth of view that comes from being through [several research review] cycles." □

The full report is available at www.csr.nih.gov/bioopp/select.htm.

US agency to test safety of four herbs

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Four popular herbal supplements are to undergo safety checks, the US National Toxicology Programme has announced. The programme—a coalition of agencies that includes the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—will test aloe vera, ginseng, kava, and milk thistle.

Researchers are expected to take a close look at whether the substances are carcinogenic. The substances were originally nominated for testing by the National Cancer Institute. The recommendations were then reviewed and approved by the federal Interagency Committee for Chemical Evaluation and Coordination, which advises the National Toxicology Program. No data indicating a problem are required for nomination to the programme.

More than 30 substances are tested by the programme each year through rodent and in vitro studies, according to Dr William Easton of National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. No human subjects are used.

One of the most widely used products among those chosen for testing, aloe vera, is commonly used to soothe burned skin, but it is increasingly turning up as a beverage, with claims that it can fight disease by "cleansing" the digestive tract. Dr Easton said that researchers have noted some similarities between aloe vera and croton oil—a known carcinogen.

Other substances that have been nominated for testing are kava, which is popularly believed to work as a muscle relaxant and mood enhancer; ginseng, which is touted as an energy booster; and milk thistle, which is thought to have anticancer properties and to improve liver function. A fifth substance nominated for testing, indole-3-carbinol, is found in cruciferous vegetables—those with cross shaped flowers, such as cabbage and turnip—and is believed to have potential to reduce the risk of cancer. □

1. Ginseng 2. Kava
3. Thistle 4. Aloe vera