In brief

Mumbai floods lead to disease outbreaks: More than 200 people died of suspected leptospirosis and other infections in Mumbai and its suburbs last week, after the severe flooding at the end of July. City officials said that hospitals have also admitted 4000 patients with symptoms of leptospirosis, gastrointestinal infections, malaria, and dengue fever.

Agency issues safety guide on drugs for children: The European Medicines Agency has launched safety guidelines on the use of drugs in children, after finding that more than 50% of prescribed drugs are unlicensed or off-label for this use. See www.emea.eu.int/pdfs/human/p/hwpv/23591005en.pdf

Patients need to be warned of codeine addiction risk: The UK Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency has asked manufacturers of over the counter painkillers that contain codeine and dihydrocodeine to update their information leaflets and include a warning that taking codeine regularly and for a long time could lead to addiction.

NHS services for drug misusers, smokers, and children to be reviewed: The Healthcare Commission, which monitors standards of health care in England, is to launch major reviews of NHS services for drug misusers, smokers, and children in hospital. After reviewing the data it will develop action plans to help improve performance in the organisations with the weakest assessments. See www.healthcarecommission.org.uk

Avian flu is still spreading: H5N1 avian flu continues to spread among birds, with cases detected on chicken farms in Tibet, China, and Siberia, as well as other eastern parts of Russia. Mongolia has reported an outbreak in migratory birds, and Kazakhstan has reported confirmed outbreaks in domestic geese and suspected outbreaks in wild geese. See page 413.

News extra
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Charity challenges US "anti-prostitution" restriction

Bob Roehr *Washington*

A US charity is to challenge the US government's requirement that international non-government organisations must explicitly oppose prostitution and sex trafficking if they are to receive government funds for family planning and HIV prevention activities.

DKT International, which is based in Washington, DC, filed a lawsuit against the US Agency for International Development (USAID) on 11 August. It claims that the provision is a gag order restricting its right to free speech and is therefore unconstitutional.

The law was enacted by Congress in 2003, with the strong support of the Bush administration, and is only now being enforced.

DKT is a non-profit organisation that implements programmes to market family planning and HIV prevention services to nearly 10 million people in 11 countries around the world. It uses commercial marketing techniques and private sector networks to distribute family planning services at an affordable, subsidised price. About 16% of its total funds come from the US government, either directly or indirectly through grants and contracts. It also receives money

CHRIS STEELE-PERKINS/MAGNUM PHOTOS

DKT claims that state opposition to prostitution restricts free speech

from the governments of the United Kingdom, Australia, and Germany, as well as from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

In July another charity specialising in work on HIV and AIDS and family planning, Family Health International, said it could not renew a USAID subcontract with DKT for ongoing work making lubricants and condoms available in Vietnam unless DKT signed the anti-prostitution pledge.

"DKT has no policy on prostitution and does not wish to adopt one," DKT argued in its lawsuit. "It believes it has a first amendment right not to do so." It said it strongly believes that it can best achieve its goals "by maintaining neutrality on the controversial question of how to handle the complex problems that arise at the intersection of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and prostitution."

"The government can tell us what to do with their money—that is not in question," said DKT's president, Philip Harvey. "But it is reprehensible and, we believe, unconstitutional to tell us what to do with private money."

The issue has been building for some time. Many organisations involved in AIDS services believe that sex workers are a key group in AIDS prevention activities and that the anti-prostitution pledge undermines the organisations' trust and credibility among sex workers.

"The extent of the consternation among non-governmental organisations doing this work in the field is enormous. Some have simply held their noses and signed it, while others have signed under protest or refused to do so," said Mr Harvey. □

US drug industry's guidelines on advertising too limited, say critics

Bob Burton *Canberra*

In the face of growing support for tighter regulations on advertising directly to consumers, the US drug industry's trade association has released voluntary guidelines of its own.

However, the guidelines fall short of a proposal by the leader of the Republican Senate majority, Bill Frist, for a two year waiting period before any new drug can be advertised directly to consumers. In July Dr Frist told the Senate that "if drug companies don't clean up their act, I believe Congress will need to act in this."

The 15 point guidelines released by the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), which are scheduled to take effect in January

2006, propose that signatories "should spend an appropriate amount of time to educate health professionals about a new medicine or a new therapeutic indication before commencing the first DTC [direct to consumer] advertising." Bristol-Myers Squibb has opted for a one year waiting period and Pfizer six months.

The trade association will refer any complaints over compliance with the code to the sponsoring company. PhRMA says it will release "periodic" reports on the "the nature of the comments and the signatory companies' responses."

While Dr Frist said the guidelines should have "gone further," Rob Schneider, the director of a

prescription drug reform project of the Consumers Union, said they were designed "to pre-empt Congress requiring the Food and Drug Administration to do significantly more on safety and transparency and consequently requiring more disclosure in any advertising."

"Legislation before the house proposes much tougher restrictions on new drugs and drugs with outstanding post-market approval studies that have not yet been completed," Mr Schneider said. A Food and Drug Administration spokesperson told the *Washington Post* that the agency would review its current policy on drug advertising. The American Medical Association was unavailable for comment. □

PhRMA's *Guiding Principles: Direct to Consumer Advertisements About Prescription Medicines* is accessible at www.phrma.org