In brief

More avian flu cases reported in China: There have been two more confirmed human cases of H5N1 avian flu in China, taking the total to five so far. The World Health Organization has questioned the effectiveness of China's surveillance of backyard farms, because so far three of the confirmed cases were in areas with no reported outbreaks among poultry.

Researchers issue hepatitis B warning: Around 620 000 people died worldwide in 2000 from causes related to hepatitis B virus, says a report in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* (2005;34:1329-39). The authors, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, said that 94% died from chronic infection related cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma and 6% died from acute hepatitis B.

Red crystal symbol gets go-ahead: The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has approved the addition of a third emblem, a diamond shaped "red crystal." It paves the way for Israel's Magen David Adom rescue and ambulance service to become a fully fledged member of the movement (*BMJ* 2005;331:654, 24 Sep).

NHS is warned to "reform or go bust": An independent think tank has said that an extra £18.2bn (\$32.2bn; €27bn) of funding is needed for the NHS over the next five years, but that only £11.4bn is in the pipeline. The organisation, Reform, said the funding was needed for extra staff, improved contracts, more expensive drugs, and large building projects. See www.reform.co.uk.

Malaria warning issued to British travellers: The UK Health Protection Agency has issued a warning about malaria after two people from Britain who had been to Gambia died. They had not taken the appropriate antimalarial drug for the area. Four people from northwest England also contracted the disease in Gambia. Two remain seriously ill in hospital.

Severe liver disease will increase unless injecting drug users are tested and treated

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

More than 7000 people in England could have severe liver disease by 2010, an increase of more than 50% on the 4500 people who now have the problem, a report from the Health Protection Agency says.

In the first of its annual

reports on hepatitis C the agency estimates that about 200 000 people in England are infected with the virus.

The agency warned that the problem was getting worse and said that more needed to be done to raise awareness of the

problem and to follow up the Department of Health's "FaCe It" awareness campaign launched in June 2004.

Helen Harris, clinical scientist in epidemiology at the agency and one of the report's authors, said, "Injecting drug use is the dominant driver in the growth of hepatitis C in England, accounting for more than 80% of diagnosed infections."

The prevalence of hepatitis C among injecting drug users is around 40%.

The situation is ripe for improvement, the report argues, because most people with chronic hepatitis C infection can be successfully treated, but the success of treatment relies on them coming forward for testing.

The report says local health services need to provide clear pathways of referral to enable these patients to access the necessary services and to have their disease diagnosed.

Dr Harris said, "Doctors... can find it difficult to ask patients about this."

Hepatitis C in England: The First Health Protection Agency Annual Report 2005 is available at www.hpa.org.uk.

Computer illustration of a hepatitis C virus, which is now carried by 200 000 people in England

Dutch doctors are given guidance on sedation

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

The Dutch Medical Association has laid down guidance on doctors' use of sedation to induce a coma in dying patients and relieve their pain and suffering.

It tries to make clear the difference between such sedation, which is produced with sedatives such as midazolam and which the guidance calls palliative sedation, and euthanasia. It says palliative sedation is "normal medical treatment" that does not "accelerate death" and that it has been incorrectly associated with "life ending treatment."

Explicitly excluded from palliative sedation is the common practice whereby the dose of morphine for pain relief in palliative care is increased until the patient loses consciousness and

is likely to die more quickly.

This is described as a "grey area between pain relief and ending life." The guidance considers the use of morphine to achieve sedation to be an "incorrect use of this medication."

Research indicates that "terminal sedation" occurs in up to 14 000 deaths in the Netherlands each year, or 10% of the total (*Annals of Internal Medicine* 2004;141:178). The public prosecution service had called for the practice to be regulated amid fears that it was being used to bypass the euthanasia law.

Alarm spread among the medical profession when a doctor, Peter Vencken, was unsuccessfully prosecuted for murder after the death of a terminally ill patient to whom he had administered pain relief and a sedative (*BMJ* 2005;331:473).

The government asked the association to draw up guidance. A committee chaired by the professor of medical ethics at Groningen University, Marian Verkerk, has concluded that palliative sedation should not be

brought under the regime of the euthanasia law. Doctors acting within the new guidance should not be prosecuted.

Palliative sedation is defined as the "deliberate reduction of a patient's consciousness in the last phase of life" as a means of relieving suffering. The dose and length of treatment should be "attuned to the required degree of symptom control." The "first choice" of drug is the sedative midazolam, although levomepromazine or phenobarbital could also be considered.

The guidance recognises that research has shown that nearly half of hospital doctors and a fifth of general practitioners have used increasing doses of morphine, partly in the hope that a terminally ill patient will lose consciousness and die swiftly.

But it considers it wrong to use morphine for these goals. Morphine is particularly inappropriate for palliative sedation because, although sedation may result as a side effect, it may also cause convulsions and hallucinations.