rates of methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* infection, and cancelled operations.

Not all areas will offer the choice of an independent sector provider. Instead the selection will depend on which centres the local primary care trust chooses to commission. In Eastern Leicester, for example, patients can opt to be treated at centres run by BUPA or Nuffield Hospitals. By contrast, patients in the Richmond and Twickenham area are offered entirely NHS choices.

The health secretary, Patricia Hewitt, acknowledged that popular hospitals could be inundated with demand and accrue longer waiting lists. "Everyone will be offered a choice within six months, but some patients may be put off their first choice of hospital if another one can treat them quicker," she said.

Rebecca Coombes *London*

CDC recommends new tuberculosis blood test

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is recommending a new blood test for tuberculosis that it believes is more accurate than the existing test. The QuantiFERON-TB Gold test, made by the Australian company Cellestis, has been used by the San Francisco Department of Public Health since February 2005. Officials there said that it was "one of the first [tuberculosis] advancements made since the discovery of antibiotics" and that it represented a considerable advance over the first generation QuantiFERON-TB test previously used, which began in 2001.

Details of the national guidance on using the test were issued in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, published by the CDC (16 Dec 2005; pp 49-55).

The advantages of the latest test, says the CDC, are higher sensitivity and specificity than the 100 year old tuberculin skin test, which is liable to false positives from non-tuberculosis bacteria and from patients with AIDS or other immune deficiency conditions. Also, the patient only

needs to attend once for the test.

According to Masae Kawamura, director of the tuberculosis control section at the San Francisco Health Department, introducing the new test has led to a big drop in false positive readings which could result in reduced healthcare costs.

Fred Charatan *Florida*

See www.cdc.gov for further details.

UK policy to reduce skills drain from Africa is ineffective

The UK government's policy of banning healthcare staff who are actively recruited from the world's poorest countries from working in the NHS is unlikely to help achieve the goal of boosting the number of doctors and nurses in the developing world, says a development specialist.

Dr Lola Banjoko, chairwoman of the Africa-wide recruitment and employment agency Africa Recruit, believes that the code of practice, which aims to restrict recruitment of healthcare professionals from 150 developing countries, is well meaning. But she says that the policy cannot work in isolation. "Trying to stop people from moving from one country to another for work is not practically workable and is an infringement of people's human rights," said Dr Banjoko. Africa Recruit aims to boost professional capacity throughout the continent.

Dr Banjoko called for an international strategy to tackle the drain of skills from developing countries. This should deal not just with the movement of trained health professionals, she argued, but it should also seek to improve the health infrastructure and working environment necessary to attract medical staff.

The United Kingdom is currently the only country in the world with a code of practice banning active recruitment of healthcare professionals from the developing world into the public health service.

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

MPs ridicule proposed UK partial smoking ban

Michael Day *London*

A Labour backbench rebellion may yet see smoking in public places fully banned in England, antismoking campaigners say. Their prediction follows an unprecedented savaging of the government's policy of a partial ban by the influential Commons health committee. The cross party group of MPs dismissed the current proposals, which would allow smoking to continue in all bars and clubs that do not serve food, as "unfair, unjust, inefficient, and unworkable."

By February, MPs will vote again on the Health Bill, which will introduce the partial ban, as it enters its final report stage in the Commons. Already, Kevin Barron, the chairman of the health committee, said that he may call for a free vote in the House, in a bid to extend the proposed ban to a complete ban that would include all pubs, bars, and private clubs. Mr Barron said, "The current proposals fly in the face of medical opinion and will do nothing to protect those most at risk."

Some 101 MPs, including 69 Labour backbenchers, have already signed a motion calling for a free vote, and the number is expected to rise.

Ian Willmore, the public affairs manager of the campaigning group Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) said, "We believe there is a real possibility that the government will allow a free vote, which the campaigners for a complete ban

would probably win. The alternative for the government is to rely on Conservative support to get the partial ban through, which it may not want to do."

Vivienne Nathanson, head of science and ethics at the BMA said, "If the government has been unmoved by doctors' concern for the public's health, perhaps it will at least listen to parliament's health committee. A partial ban on smoking in public places will bring nothing short of unworkable chaos, and the most disadvantaged in society will continue to be most at risk. The public knows it, the chief medical officer knows it, MPs across all parties know it. And the government knows it."

To add to ministers' discomfort, just 24 hours after the committee's report, new evidence emerged that passive smoking can cause a common type of blindness in older people. Cambridge researchers reported in the *British Journal of Ophthalmology* that living with a smoker for five years doubled the risk of age related macular degeneration and regular smoking tripled it (2006;90:75-80). About 500 000 people in the UK have age related macular degeneration.

Anita Lightstone, the Royal National Institute for the Blind's head of eye health, said, "This is an extremely important finding and [is] further evidence to back our call for a ban on smoking in all enclosed public places and workplaces across the UK." □

Health secretary Patricia Hewitt defends the partial smoking ban while giving evidence at the health select committee in October