In brief

Third UK case of vCJD is linked to blood transfusion: A third case of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease linked to a blood transfusion has been diagnosed. The patient developed the disease eight years after receiving blood from a donor with the disease. The first such case was identified in December 2003 (*BMJ* 2004;328:118-9).

Women more likely to have "do not resuscitate" note: Elderly women patients are more likely than men to have a "do not resuscitate" (DNR) order in their notes, says a prospective study of 723 patients admitted for emergency surgery in one hospital. The authors, from Weill Medical College, Cornell University, New York, found that women were more likely to be given DNR status (16.4% versus 9.5% ($P < 0.01$)) despite similar mortality and morbidity.

Pneumococcal vaccination to be introduced in the UK: The UK childhood vaccination programme is being extended to include vaccination against pneumococcal disease. The disease affects 400 children each year, killing 50 and leaving many more severely disabled.

Uganda and Sudan report outbreaks of meningococcal disease: Uganda reported 301 cases of meningococcal meningitis and 23 deaths in the first five weeks of 2006, while Sudan reported 136 suspected cases and 15 deaths in January. The epidemic threshold was crossed in two administrative units in Sudan.

Seating position may be linked to depression: A study of patients in one general practice shows that right handed people with anxiety or depression were more likely to choose to sit on the left of the GP in a face to face consultation. Over half of the 385 people (59%) in this group sat on the left, compared with 85 of the 316 people (27%) in the control group (odds ratio 4.0 (2.7 to 6.3)). These results, say the author, support the idea that orienting behaviour may be disturbed in states of anxiety and depression (*Laterality* 2006;11:90-100).

FDA committee votes for warning labels on stimulant drugs

Fred Charatan *Florida*

An advisory committee of the Food and Drug Administration voted by 8-7 last week to require drug companies to display a "black box" warning label on several stimulant drugs used to treat attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

The drugs are methylphenidate hydrochloride (sold as Ritalin and Concerta) and the amphetamine formulation sold in the United States as Adderall.

The committee, whose recommendation was unexpected, said the warning was necessary because of the drugs' association with rises in blood pressure and heart rate, which have the potential to increase the risk of heart

attack, stroke, or sudden death.

"I must say that I have grave concerns about the use of these drugs and grave concerns about the harm they may cause," said Steven Nissen, a cardiologist from the Cleveland Clinic and a committee member (*New York Times*, 10 Feb, A19).

But Thomas Laughren, director of the Division of Psychiatry Products at the FDA, said, "We don't think anything different needs to be done right now." Top FDA officials said that warning patients about theoretical risks might scare many away from the treatment they need (*New York Times* 10 Feb, A19).

Stimulants are the most wide-

ly prescribed drugs for the disorder, and more than 30 million prescriptions for them are written in the US each year.

The FDA said it had identified 17 cases of sudden death in people who were taking an amphetamine between 1999 and 2003, 12 of them (0.36 per million prescriptions) in children. There were also 35 reports of cardiovascular or stroke problems in people taking amphetamines (0.53 adverse events per million prescriptions).

Although methylphenidate has been in use since 1955, and dozens of studies have shown it to be safe and effective, no long term studies have been done to evaluate its effects on the heart. In 1998 a panel of experts from the National Institutes of Health called for research into the long term effects of treatment with methylphenidate (*BMJ* 1998;317:1545). □

Africa is ill equipped to fight a bird flu epidemic

Peter Moszynski *London*

The emergence of the H5N1 strain of avian influenza in several countries in Europe and Africa last week has led the World Health Organization to issue a warning. It said: "H5N1 is spreading rapidly across the world. All countries must take measures to protect human health against avian flu, and prepare for a pandemic."

H5N1 has now been identified in migratory swans in Italy, Greece, and Slovenia, but it is the arrival of the virus in northern Nigeria that most concerns the authorities. Sub-Saharan countries—beset by poverty, war, and hunger and with extremely weak public health and veterinary facilities—are ill equipped to deal with any crisis involving bird flu. There are also fears that the virus may have already spread undetected to other parts of the continent.

WHO's director general, Lee Jong-wook, said: "African health systems are already struggling to cope with children and adults suffering from HIV/AIDS,

tuberculosis, malaria, respiratory infections, and other infectious conditions. Human cases of H5N1 may be difficult to distinguish from other illnesses.

"We simply do not know what the impact of exposure to avian influenza will be on the many people who may be already immunocompromised and in a fragile state of health."

Chickens are commonplace in Africa, and most poultry is bought live and slaughtered at home as few people have refrigerators. Close contact with a live infected bird is the means by which the disease is transmitted.

Another concern is that because many Africans are familiar with Newcastle disease, a

poultry infection that has no effect on humans, they are unaware of the risk of transmission from birds to humans of bird flu and use few protective measures. Several suspected cases in humans are currently being investigated.

In Nigeria a major drive to identify outbreaks of bird flu and alert people to its dangers has been combined with a planned campaign on polio.

David Nabarro, head of a new UN influenza task force, said that although no cases had yet been shown of the virus being directly transmitted between people, the arrival of the virus in Nigeria should be "a strong wake-up call." □

Most poultry is bought live in Africa, increasing the risk of transmission of the virus from birds to humans