In brief

Bird flu deaths rise: Indonesia has confirmed its 45th death from H5N1 avian influenza—a 9 year old girl from West Java province. Two other recent deaths in the village suggest a shared environmental source, according to the World Health Organization. China has also confirmed its 14th death from bird flu—a 62 year old man in the northwestern Xinjiang autonomous region.

Protests impede health care in Nepal: About 25 000 junior level health workers in Nepal have been staging protests against the government's failure to fulfil their demands for, among other things, at least two promotions during their 20 years of employment. The protests have severely affected the delivery of healthcare services, especially in rural areas, which are predominantly staffed by more junior employees.

German strike ends: More than 70 000 doctors in German community clinics have ended an eight week strike after reaching an agreement on salary rises and fewer working hours. Critics doubt whether smaller hospitals will be able to afford the new deal. In June, doctors working in university clinics also ended a three month strike.

Merck loses another Vioxx court case: A US federal court jury in New Orleans has awarded a former agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation \$51m (£27m; €40m) in damages for a heart attack he sustained after taking Vioxx (rofecoxib) for three years. The jury said that Merck had not warned doctors of the drug's possible side effects. Merck faces more than 14 000 lawsuits related to rofecoxib.

Government announces more PFI deals: Six new private finance initiative (PFI) funded hospitals have been given the go ahead in England, worth close to £1.5 billion. Up to half the beds at the new hospitals will be in single rooms. See www.gnn.gov.uk.

Women forced into sterilisation protest to UN

Katka Krosnar *Prague*

A group of Czech Roma women who said that they were forcibly sterilised have, on 17 August, outlined their stories in person to a United Nations committee in New York. They hope this will exert pressure on the Czech government to apologise.

On the same day, many Roma women staged a protest outside a hospital in the east of the Czech Republic to raise awareness for their cause. About 30 women carrying banners stating "we want children" and "sterilise gherkins not women" protested outside the municipal hospital in Ostrava in an attempt to get a public apology from the government.

A report by the Czech ombudsman released several months ago found that at least 50 women had been unlawfully

sterilised as recently as 2003 (*BMJ* 2006;332:138). Eighty women had lodged complaints with the ombudsman, alleging they underwent operations to be sterilised against their will.

Michaela Kopalova, the lawyer representing many of the women involved, says that the women had not fully understood what the procedure entailed.

"These women are suffering long term after effects because of what happened to them. They want a public apology from the government as well as a symbolic amount of compensation, and hopefully the United Nations can exert pressure for this to happen," Ms Kopalova told the *BMJ*.

The women involved say they underwent the procedure because they did not receive enough information about what it involved. They are demanding an apology and also financial compensation.

Four cases have now been lodged with the Czech courts.

Helena Ferencikova, a mother of two boys who was sterilised when she was 19, won the first

civil legal case brought in the Czech Republic over an unwanted sterilisation. However, both Mrs Ferencikova, who is seeking financial compensation, and Ostrava's Vitkovice Hospital have appealed against the verdict.

A spokeswoman for Ostrava's municipal hospital, Marie Dlabalova, insisted that the women had been properly informed about the operation before it was done. "We sympathise with these women but the consent forms contain their signatures. No doctor at the hospital did anything wrong or illegal," Mrs Dlabalova said.

The spokeswoman added that since the complaints were lodged the hospital had changed its procedure and no longer performed sterilisations at the same time as delivery.

"The committee set up by the health ministry to investigate these complaints did find some wrongdoing. But this was on an individual basis and it was not the case that there was any wrongdoing on a wider level by the state," said Jana Kocova, a health ministry spokeswoman. □

Childhood asthma admissions peak with return to school

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Admissions of children to hospital with asthma peak in the first few days of school after the summer holidays, a report from Australia has shown.

Admissions begin to rise after the first day and continue to increase until the middle of the fourth week of the new school term, says research in the jour-

nal *Public Health* (published online 10 Aug 2006, doi: 10.1016/j.puhe.2006.05.015).

"Our study suggests that returning to a congregate setting, even after a short break, substantially increases the risk of a child experiencing an asthma attack requiring medical attention," says the lead author, Douglas Lincoln.

In the study, the authors investigated the seasonal pattern of hospital admission rates for asthma in the metropolitan area of Sydney in children aged up to 14 years. During the seven year study 20 334 children aged 1-4 years and 13 284 aged 5-14 years were admitted to emergency departments with asthma.

The results show that the increase in risk of admission began soon after the first day of school of each term for schoolchildren aged 5-14 years old but not in preschool children aged 1-4 years. Results show that the

risk of admission because of asthma in children aged 5-14 years generally went down in the long summer holiday and increased steeply after the start of term.

Risk of admission because of asthma increased to a peak between two and four weeks after the first day of school in each term and varied between 1.5 and 3 times the risk before return to school for both age groups.

The largest increase in asthma risk occurred in term one after the long summer holiday. The risk for children aged 5-14 years increased significantly by a factor of 3.05 (95% confidence interval 2.37 to 3.93), peaking at 23 days after the first day of school.

The authors, from Queensland Institute of Medical Research, University of Sydney, Southern Cross University, and other centres, say it has been suggested that children returning to school have greater exposure to viral respiratory infections after the extended summer school holidays and are therefore more likely to be admitted to hospital with an acute asthma exacerbation. □

Returning to school increases asthma risk