In brief

Commission is to investigate *C difficile* outbreak: England's Healthcare Commission is to investigate high rates of infections of *Clostridium difficile* at hospitals of the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust. Meanwhile three hospitals in Leicester say that *C difficile* has caused 28 deaths in the past year and may have contributed to 21 more deaths.

Israel bans age checks on child immigrants: Israel's health ministry is to end its practice of wrist radiography to determine the age of illegal immigrant children sent to it by the country's immigration authority. The practice was revealed by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel. Children get special privileges, and the authority did not trust the children's claims as to their age.

Trampoline injuries give cause for concern: Over three months, one emergency department in England dealt with 168 trampoline related injuries in patients aged from 4 months to 16 years, a study found. The incidence and severity of such injury have become a major public health concern, say the authors, from the Royal Liverpool Children's NHS Trust (*Pediatric Emergency Care* 2006;22:644-6).

Smoking ban is linked to fall in heart attacks: The number of people aged under 60 admitted to hospital with acute heart attack in the Piedmont region of Italy in the five months after smoking in indoor public places was banned was 11% lower than in the same period in the previous year (*European Heart Journal* doi: 10.1093/eurheartj/ehl201).

US insurance premiums rise again: The cost of employer sponsored health premiums for US families rose by 7.7% in 2006, twice the rate of wage increases and inflation, says the Kaiser Family Foundation (www.kff.org). The average annual health cover for a worker and family is \$11 480 (£6100; €9000), of which the employee pays \$2973. Premiums have increased by 87% overall since 2000.

Labour leadership defeated on health reforms at party conference

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

The leadership of the Labour party was defeated on its health policy at last week's annual party conference.

The vote at the conference in Manchester ended in defeat for the leadership when most delegates supported a motion from the trade union Unison. The motion called for a slowing down of the pace of reform in the NHS and an end to the growing privatisation of the health service.

It means that Labour party members have called on the government to:

- Give financially troubled NHS trusts more time to achieve financial balance
- Stop any extension of the payment by results system for hospitals, under which hospitals are paid a fixed price for each individual case treated, without a full assessment of the consequences for local health systems
- Review with the party and the NHS any further outsourcing of services to the private sector, such as those of the NHS

supplies department, NHS Logistics.

The vote, which does not change official government policy, forces ministers to rethink their approach and to acknowledge opposition. It was timely because simultaneously hundreds of staff from NHS

The secretary of state for health, Patricia Hewitt, says that change is inevitable

Logistics had formed picket lines at five supply depots in England.

NHS Logistics delivers supplies to the NHS, including medical equipment and food to hospitals. Its employees are striking to protest at the privatisation of the organisation and its transfer to the German delivery firm DHL this week.

The motion called on the government to "rethink the headlong rush to a competitive system" and said, "Immense damage is being done to some local services because of deficits and the break-neck speed of change."

The general secretary of Unison, Dave Prentis, proposing the motion, condemned the plans to privatise NHS Logistics and the reconfiguration of NHS services, which he said would lead to closures.

"This is about a moral compass that says enough is enough," said Mr Prentis. "Leave the privatisation and failing markets to the Tories."

The health secretary, Patricia Hewitt, who also spoke in the debate, called for delegates to reject Mr Prentis's motion because change was inevitable and added, "Any organisation which refuses to make difficult decisions to get back on track is an organisation which in a few years will have to make even more difficult decisions."

BMA joins health unions in bid to change Labour policy

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

All of the British healthcare trade unions and many representative bodies in the NHS have united in a new organisation aimed at forcing the government to change direction on its health reforms.

NHS Together—which brings together unions affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) such as Unison and the GMB with organisations such as the BMA, the Royal College of Nursing, and the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association—was officially launched last week.

Representatives attending a fringe meeting at last week's

Labour party conference in Manchester confirmed that they will invite NHS staff to take part in a lobby of parliament on 1 November.

The alliance claims to be unprecedented. Brendan Barber, the TUC's general secretary, speaking at the launch of the alliance last week, said that this reflected the "unprecedented anger about the pace and direction of change" in the NHS.

All the bodies involved are urging the government to change course in its future management of the NHS, but they also acknowledge that many improvements in the health service have been achieved in recent years, resulting in better care of patients.

However, the alliance is warning that this progress is now under threat on three fronts:

- Sudden budget cuts in some NHS trusts are threatening jobs and patients' care
- An excess of top-down

change has failed to involve or win the support of staff

- Fragmentation of the NHS is hindering health professionals' ability to provide the best possible care.

A BMA spokesperson said: "We have joined NHS Together as, along with other health sector unions, we are concerned about the direction of government policies, in particular the expanding role of the private sector in the health service."

"The BMA believes the increasing use of the commercial sector threatens to fragment and destabilise the NHS."

The Department of Health disagreed that a change of direction was needed. A spokesperson said: "The NHS reform agenda is about putting patients first and involving staff at the heart of shaping services. Every union and stakeholder signed up to the principles of the NHS plan, which set the course for reform over 10 years."