In brief

SARS case confirmed in

Singapore: A new confirmed case of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) has emerged in Singapore, the first since the end of May, when the city was declared free of SARS after the disease had killed 33 people there. The Singapore health authorities and the World Health Organization believe it is an isolated case.

Ethiopia's famine worsens

despite aid: A joint appeal by the Sudan government and the United Nations last week called for assistance for an extra 2.4 million people in Ethiopia. A total of 13.2 million people now require emergency food.

Judge dismisses case against

McDonald's: A US federal judge, Robert Sweet, dismissed a revised lawsuit that sought damages against the fast food chain McDonald's. The lawsuit, brought on behalf of obese teenagers, alleged that the plaintiffs' health problems were due to unhealthy high energy content and large portion foods served by McDonald's restaurants, and that McDonald's engaged in misleading advertising.

US doctors prescribe fewer

antibiotics to children: The number of antibiotics prescribed for US children has fallen substantially in recent years. Researchers reviewed medical claims involving more than 200 000 children aged between 3 months and 18 years, who were covered by nine medical plans. The reduction for children aged 3 months to 3 years varied among health plans from 6% to 39%. One explanation was that doctors were diagnosing fewer children with otitis media (*Pediatrics* 2003;112:620-7).

PFI hospital hit by problems:

An investigation has been ordered after emergency generators failed to work when Scotland's flagship new hospital was hit by a power cut. Staff had to rely on battery back up for an hour. It is the latest in a series of problems to hit the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, built under the controversial private finance initiative (PFI).

Infusing hormone fragment reduces appetite

Susan Mayor *London*

Obese people have lower levels of the peptide YY₃₋₃₆ (PYY), a fragment of an appetite regulating gut hormone, and consume significantly fewer calories after they have received a synthetic form of PYY, a new, small study has found. This suggests that PYY infusion might be a potential treatment for obesity, say the authors.

The study, published last week in the *New England Journal of Medicine* compared the effects of PYY infusion with placebo on appetite and food intake in 12 obese and 12 lean healthy volunteers. The mean body mass index (weight(kg)/(height(m)³)) of these two groups was, 33.0 and 20.5 respectively.

After an overnight fast, the study subjects were given a 90 minute infusion of either PYY or placebo (a saline solution). They were offered an unlimited buffet meal two hours after the end of the infusion.

Using a crossover design, the

researchers compared the effects of PYY and placebo in each of the participants. Results showed that after infusion of PYY, energy intake during the buffet lunch was 30% lower in obese subjects ($P<0.001$) and 31% lower in lean subjects ($P<0.001$) than after infusion of saline. PYY also caused a significant reduction in the cumulative 24 hour energy intake in both groups (*New England Journal of Medicine* 2003;349:941-8).

Further results showed that the obese participants had levels of PYY that were, on average, a third lower than the levels of lean participants (mean endogenous fasting and postprandial PYY level 10.2 pmol/l in obese participants *v* 16.9 pmol/l in lean participants; $P<0.001$).

Stephen Bloom, professor of medicine at Imperial College in Hammersmith Hospital, London, and one of the paper's authors, said: "The discovery that obese people have lower levels of PYY, an important factor limit-

ing appetite, suggests a possible new treatment for obesity."

He added: "Our previous research has shown that it is possible to reduce caloric consumption in lean volunteers by giving PYY. These new findings suggest boosting PYY offers a novel approach towards treating the epidemic of obesity in our society. An agent with the ability to reduce appetite by 30% has the potential to significantly reduce body weight." The research was supported by the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council.

PYY is a fragment of a hormone that is released from endocrine cells in the gut in response to eating. It is a peptide with a tyrosine (Y) at each end—hence the name PYY—first characterised in 1984.

The PYY infused in the study was a synthetic human sequenced, purified form. In a similar way to the adipocyte hormone leptin, PYY reduces food intake by modulating appetite circuits in the hypothalamus. However, there is marked resistance to the action of leptin in people who are obese, and this has limited its therapeutic effectiveness. □

US medical students opt for better life not better pay

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

An increasing number of US medical students are picking their specialty on the basis of assumptions about the lifestyle that it would permit—including more time for family and leisure activities—rather than traditional factors such as pay and prestige.

The finding suggests there might be shortages of doctors in specialties such as surgery and obstetrics as medical students shun fields in which they are required to be on-call during many off duty hours (*JAMA* 2003;290:1173-8).

Researchers collected six years of data, from 1996 to 2002.

They classified 16 specialties as having either a controllable or uncontrollable lifestyle, partly on the basis of the number of hours that doctors were required to be

Medical students from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences discuss life after medical school

on-call or to spend in the hospital.

For each of the selected specialties, the investigators counted the number of students ranking a particular specialty as his or her first choice.

From 1996 to 2002 the percentage of students choosing some specialties rose: anaesthesiology from 1.1% to 6.4%; dermatology from 0.2% to 2.3%; and radiology from 3.3% to 6.1%.

In contrast, the proportion of students choosing family practice and general surgery declined between 1996 and 2002 from 16.1% to 9.5% and from 10.4% to 7.6% respectively.

Three factors—the number of work hours a week, adequate time for vocational pursuits, and number of call nights during practice—were weighted more highly than other motivators. □