In brief

Leading causes of death differ by sex: Men are more likely than women to die of cancer, while women are more likely to die of circulatory diseases, show new government figures on the leading causes of death in England and Wales in 2003. Circulatory diseases accounted for 38% of all deaths, while cancer accounted for 25% and respiratory diseases accounted for 14%. See www.statistics.gov.uk

UK stem cell research gets major boost: The UK government has awarded £16.5m (\$30.2m; €24.8m) to five research councils to boost stem cell research. Fifty seven research grants have been made available for projects covering new treatments for major diseases and disabilities and for further work on stem cell biology.

Deaths in Britain from malaria have doubled: The number of deaths in the United Kingdom from falciparum malaria rose from nine to 16 between 2002 and 2003, show figures from the Health Protection Agency. Falciparum malaria accounts for 78% of all cases in the country, which in 2003 numbered 1722. Black Africans are the group most likely to be affected.

British men are reluctant to have cancer symptoms checked: Only half of British men said they would immediately see a doctor if they found blood in their stools, a survey of 1888 adults carried out by Cancer Research UK has found. Men aged under 45 years were the most likely to cite embarrassment as a reason for delaying getting their symptoms checked.

Air passengers' health is overlooked: Airline regulation has focused on safety and ignored passengers' health, claims a report from the BMA's Board of Science and Education. *The Impact of Flying on Passenger Health* says little research into the health risks of air travel has been done and that the standards of training of airline crew in health and of onboard equipment vary considerably.

New law forces Italian couple with genetic disease to implant all their IVF embryos

Fabio Turone *Rome*

An Italian judge ordered a sterile couple to transfer all the embryos obtained with assisted reproduction techniques, despite the fact that both would-be parents carry the recessive gene for β thalassaemia, wanted a preimplant diagnosis, and would not keep a child born with the condition.

The law, approved early this year (*BMJ* 2004;328:9), bans both freezing and destroying embryos, limits to three the number of oocytes that can be fertilised, and states that all the created embryos must be transferred. It also restricts the use of assisted reproduction techniques to sterile couples.

But the law does not affect the legislation allowing abortion in the first six months of pregnancy in the case of serious illnesses.

The couple, from Lecce in southeast Italy, had tried several attempts in a private centre in Catania, Sicily.

"When the law came into effect, I told them I would be obliged to transfer all embryos," explained the couple's doctor, Nino Guglielmino, medical director of the Hera Centre, which is run by a non-profit making association of parents of children

born via in vitro fertilisation.

"The woman couldn't stand the idea of starting a pregnancy with a β thalassaemic embryo, which she would abort, so we agreed to appeal this part of the law in a court."

The judge from the Court of Catania had stated that, according to the new law, the woman did not have the right to choose to have a healthy baby.

Speaking in a radio interview, the 35 year old woman, who teaches disabled children and who was given a false name, "Laura," to maintain privacy, said: "Less than one month after the court's decision and the embryo transfer, I was hospitalised for a gastric haemorrhage, likely to

Embryo at 10 cell stage, on the point of a pin

HIV positive witness learns of his status in courtroom

Clare Dyer
legal correspondent, BMJ

A judge last week demanded an inquiry into how a blood sample from a witness in a criminal case was handed to defence lawyers by police and tested for HIV without his consent.

The witness learned for the first time that he had tested positive for the virus when he was questioned about it by defence counsel in a packed courtroom in Leicester.

The shocked defence witness,

who the judge ordered must not be named, denied all knowledge of his HIV positive status when he was questioned by the barrister, who assumed he must know of it.

It emerged that defence lawyers had sent a sample of his blood, handed over by police at the request of the Crown Prosecution Service, for an HIV test without his knowledge.

The man had given the blood sample for DNA testing last year after he was arrested on suspicion of an offence. He was later released without charge.

The judge said last week that the sample should have been destroyed after the man was discharged and ordered that he should be given immediate counselling.

The judge had been given a copy of the test result by the

have been caused by stress, and the pregnancy ended."

The tests later showed that the embryo was healthy.

The health minister, Girolamo Sirchia, insisted that the guidelines being drafted by a commission will correct this part of the new law, but other effects of the law are also starting to emerge.

Many hundreds of non-sterile couples, fearful of having babies with genetic illnesses, have started to go abroad. Many specialists and researchers in the field have done the same.

In addition, the experience of the first few months with the new rules seems to confirm the worst scenarios anticipated by the opponents of the law. Many centres report a reduction in the success rates for women older than 35 and a steep increase in multiple pregnancies in those younger than 35, who are often implanted with three embryos.

● Professor Carlo Flamigni, a pioneer in assisted reproduction techniques, has announced his intention to admit to the authorities in Bologna that he froze an ootid (the oocyte after the penetration by sperm but before the formation of a zygote). Italian law bans only the freezing of embryos. "Maybe I'll be arrested," he said, "but maybe the judge will decide that, according to the law, the ootid and even the zygote can be frozen, since neither was cited in the law." □

defence but did not realise that the witness was unaware of it.

To protect the identity of the witness, the judge banned any reporting of the details of the case, including why the man's HIV status was relevant to the issues in the trial, which finished last week. His questioning in court took place last month but could not be reported until the end of the trial.

The Crown Prosecution Service said it had handed over the blood sample in fulfilment of its duty to make full and proper disclosure to the defence. It was in a list of unused material that prosecutors are required to supply, and the defence requested it.

"What the defence do with it is up to them and we can't stop them," said a spokeswoman. "We were just the middle person in this." □