In brief

Inquiry into Gulf war illnesses set up in United Kingdom: An independent public inquiry is to investigate the causes of illness among veterans of the 1991 Gulf war. Lord Lloyd of Berwick, a former Lord Justice of Appeal, will lead the inquiry, which is to be funded by private donors.

Poll shows 80% of Britons want smoke-free workplaces: Four out of five British residents support a law making all enclosed workplaces smoke-free, according to the results of a MORI poll commissioned by Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). The poll of more than 4000 people shows that support for a smoke-free workplace law is strong across all social classes, and that 59% of daily smokers back the idea.

Doctors must report torture: The ethical obligation on physicians to report acts of torture has been restated by the president of the World Medical Association, Dr James Appleyard. Giving the annual address at the English Speaking Union in Canterbury, Dr Appleyard said that the non-denunciation of acts of torture might be considered as a form of tolerance and non-assistance to the victims.

Chinese authorities recall baby milk: Health authorities in the Chinese city of Guiyang have said they are recalling more than 9000 bags of highly toxic milk powder. More than 150 children in the southwestern province of Guizhou were poisoned earlier this month by drinking the formula. Tests on the powder showed it contained the golden staphylococcus toxin.

Australia to reverse its decision on morning after pill: The Australian government plans to ban sales of the morning-after pill levonorgestrel (Postinor-2) only six months after making it available over the counter at chemists. Federal health minister Tony Abbott said the government wants to make the pill prescription-only because of concerns that girls as young as 13 are using it as emergency contraception.

Campaign to revitalise academic medicine calls for radical thinking

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

A campaign to breathe new life into academic medicine has called for a radical rethink on the way medical research is organised in order to capture global health issues that matter to patients and make a difference to their lives.

More than 90 researchers, educators, policy makers, clinicians, and funders from around the world gathered for the campaign's inaugural meeting this week at BMA House. Their aim

was to define the future of academic medicine, which they say is threatened by lack of funding and facilities and poor career prospects. The campaign, which was launched last November by the *BMJ*, has so far attracted the involvement of more than 20 international journals and organisations.

Delegates at the meeting agreed that the time for an ivory tower attitude had passed, and

that modern academic medicine required transparency, leadership, and a community and patient focus to gain better understanding and support from the public.

Many delegates expressed frustration with the direction of most research, which continues to address health issues that affect a minority of the world's population. "With the advent of SARS and bioterrorism, medicine has moved into a one world health," said Tim Evans, an assistant director general of the World Health Organization. "It is important to recognise the latent and growing demand for engagement in global health."

Professor David Weatherall, emeritus regius professor at the University of Oxford, welcomed the initiative as an important opportunity with great potential to develop basic science for the benefit of patients across the globe.

An international working party of 20 individuals from the meeting will continue discussions over the next week and develop recommendations to take the campaign forward. It will publish the recommendations ahead of a second meeting next year. □

MARK THOMAS

Professor David Weatherall said there was potential to develop basic science to help patients across the globe

Low priority for maternity services blamed for deaths

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

Maternity services at New Cross Hospital in Wolverhampton, where three babies died unexpectedly in the space of two months, had such a low priority among senior management that they have been described as "invisible" by an independent review.

The Healthcare Commission (also called the Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection) found that although perinatal mortality at New Cross Hospital was no higher than at hospitals serving similar populations in other parts of the country, two of the deaths might have avoided if problems had been identified sooner and action taken more promptly.

The commission's report blames senior managers at the Birmingham and Black Country Strategic Health Authority for not doing enough to ensure good quality care for women and their babies. "The maternity service has functioned as well as it has under the circumstances due to the dedication and hard work of individual staff," it says.

Altogether there were four serious incidents at the hospital between 27 January and 21 March 2003: the unexpected death of three babies during or shortly after delivery and one delayed caesarean section. But it took two months for the strategic health authority and the primary care trust to be informed about them.

Concern among the public and the primary care trust about the safety and quality of care for pregnant women at the hospital prompted the health authority to request an investigation from the then Commission for Health Improvement.

As well as poor management and leadership the report high-

lights the lack of teamwork between consultants and between consultants and midwives. Instead of discussing and trying to resolve issues where opinions differed, issues were avoided, says the report.

Altogether the commission made 15 recommendations for maternity services at the hospital, which it will monitor with other organisations.

Health chiefs accepted the recommendations of the report. Mark Hackett, chief executive of Royal Wolverhampton Hospitals NHS Trust, said: "We are currently working to agree an action plan to implement the Healthcare Commission's recommendations in full. However, we would like to stress that the trust has been striving to improve services ever since these concerns first came to light." □

A summary of the investigation into maternity services provided by the Royal Wolverhampton Hospitals NHS Trust at New Cross Hospital is available at www.healthcarecommission.org.uk