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Opinions on public health are split along class lines

British voters would favour tough government measures to promote public health, a representative survey of 1000 people, published this week, has indicated. However, views on the role of the NHS and priorities for government action differ according to social class.

The survey, which was conducted for the Health Development Agency and the King's Fund, an independent think tank on health policy, showed that poorer people wanted the NHS to focus on treating illness, while the more affluent saw health promotion as an important part of its role.

Among people in professions and management—classified as socioeconomic groups A and B—57% said the NHS should prioritise health promotion, compared with 36% of people in the lower socioeconomic groups D and E.

People on lower incomes also reported worse health. Almost 60% of respondents from groups D and E said they were in good health, compared with 80% of people in groups A and B.

Colleen Shannon *London*

NHS takes makers of generic drugs to court for price fixing

The NHS is seeking over £100m (\$183m; €150m) in compensation from two manufacturers of generic drugs that allegedly formed a cartel to fix artificially high prices for ranitidine, the generic form of the ulcer drug Zantac.

The case is the latest to emerge from an ongoing investigation by the NHS Counter Fraud and Security Management Service into anticompetitive behaviour in the generic drug industry. Jim Gee, chief executive of the service, said the overcharging for ranitidine was the most serious example yet uncovered

Smoking continues to fall among US teens

The percentage of US teenagers who smoke fell to 22% in 2003—the lowest level since records began in 1991, a new survey shows (*Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 2004;53:499-502). Experts are attributing the findings to the rising cost of cigarettes.

At about \$4 (£2.20; €3.30) for a pack of cigarettes, teenagers would rather spend their money on new clothes, a movie, or eating out. High school students are also becoming more conscientious about their health and less intrigued by lighting up, finds the study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta.

The government claims that its new antismoking campaigns and higher cigarette taxes are responsible for the fall in the number of young smokers.

The figure is down from more than 36% in 1997 and is the lowest level since the CDC began keeping records of smoking trends among young people in 1991. For the first time in more than two decades the percentage of adults who smoke is higher than the percentage of high school smokers.

The study also found that fewer students are trying cigarettes. About 58% of students in 2003 said they had tried smoking, down from 70% in 1999.

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

ered and may have deprived the NHS of up to £110m.

"All the civil claims we have brought will be vigorously pursued to secure the maximum possible recovery for the NHS either by judgment and damages or earlier agreement with the defendant companies," said Mr Gee. "My organisation's investigations regarding the anticompetitive supply of over 30 other generic drugs continue."

The claim, the biggest of its kind in British legal history, was lodged with the High Court by the secretary of state for health, the Prescription Pricing Authority, and the 28 English strategic health authorities, against Generics UK Limited (a subsidiary of the German pharma-

ceutical giant Merck) and Ranbaxy UK (the British division of the Indian generic drug manufacturer Ranbaxy).

Owen Dyer *London*

Fear of stigma deters US soldiers from seeking psychiatric help

Fear of stigmatisation resulted in less than half of US combat infantry personnel who developed mental health problems after serving in Iraq or Afghanistan seeking treatment, finds a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (2004; 351:13-28).

Soldiers most in need of treatment feared being stigmatised the most, says an accompanying editorial by Dr Matthew Friedman, of the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Vermont. Dr Friedman suggests soldiers fear that "a scarlet P [signifying post-traumatic stress disorder] could doom their careers."

The study, by Dr Charles Hoge, of the department of psychiatry and behavioural science at the Walter Reed Army Institute for Research, Maryland, and colleagues, involved 6201 soldiers serving in four US combat infantry units, who were surveyed either before their deployment to Iraq or three to four months after their return from combat in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

The questions sought to establish the prevalence of major depression, generalised anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The prevalence of these conditions was higher among personnel who served in Iraq (15.6% to 17.1% of the participants), where exposure to combat was considerably greater, than in those who served in Afghanistan (11.2%). The prevalence among soldiers who were surveyed before deployment to Iraq was 9.3%.

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

Doctors mistrust systems for reporting medical mistakes

UK doctors do not trust NHS monitoring systems designed to report medical mistakes, a representative survey of 2500 doctors has found.

The survey, carried out by the doctors' online network, Doctors.net.uk, indicates that although eight out of 10 respondents had witnessed a colleague making a mistake, few were apparently willing to use the available systems to report it.

One in 10 of the 100 000 strong membership of Doctors.net.uk were surveyed in June to gauge their views on