GP deputising service cases are "cause for concern," says ombudsman

England's health service ombudsman, Ann Abraham, has expressed alarm at the number of serious cases involving GP deputising services that she has seen in the past six months.

The quality of care, communication with patients, and record keeping in these cases are a "cause for concern," she says in her latest investigations into complaints against the NHS, published this week.

In one case a 32 year old man from London rapidly deteriorated with meningococcal septicaemia as he waited five hours for the on-call GP to visit. The GP not only failed to administer the appropriate antibiotic but also failed in his duty of care by not waiting with the patient until the ambulance arrived, the ombudsman found. The young man died in hospital shortly afterwards.

Debashis Singh *London*

Health Service Ombudsman: Selected Investigations Completed October 2003-March 2004 is available from www.ombudsman.org.uk

Annual tobacco deaths in poor countries to reach 7 million by 2030

The rapid rise in smoking in many developing countries will have devastating consequences, a new report says.

By 2030, the number of deaths resulting from tobacco use will reach 7 million a year in the developing world, the authors of a review in *Thorax* have estimated (2004;59:623-30).

Smoking rates began rising in the early 1970s, and by 1995 about 82% of the world's smokers were in the developing world. In 2000, there were 2.41 million deaths in developing countries related to smoking.

The report says that rates of

smoking among health professionals in the developing world are high. In 1999, 37% of Algerian medical students smoked, as did 61% of physicians from a hospital in China in 1996.

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Researcher objects to drinks industry representative sitting on alcohol research body

A researcher working on alcohol dependence has criticised the appointment of the chief executive of a lobby group funded by the drinks industry to the United Kingdom's Alcohol Education and Research Council (AERC) because he fears a potential conflict of interest.

Professor Robin Room, a professor at the University of Stockholm and director of the Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs in Stockholm, Sweden, was concerned by the recent appointment of Jean Coussins, chief executive of the Portman Group. The group was set up in 1989 by UK drinks producers, and its main aim was "to promote responsible drinking." Ms Coussins was appointed by the secretary of state for culture, the government department that oversees the work of the AERC.

Professor Room considered that the appointment of Ms Coussins was potentially a problem because of the Portman Group's lobbying role and previous stance on alcohol research. He noted that the group had been exposed in 1995 for offering money to scholars for negative views on a World Health Organization report, *Alcohol Policy and the Public Good*.

Professor Griffith Edwards, emeritus professor of addiction at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, agreed: "Jean Coussins is not a representative of the brewing industry but of a lobby group."

Dr Noel Olsen, chairman of the council, said: "The debate on whether industry should be represented [on the AERC's board] needs to be aired."

Susan Mayor *London*

Woman forced to have three embryos implanted is allowed fetal reduction to save her life

Sophie Arie *Rome*

Italians are debating the "medieval" nature of a new law on fertility treatment after a young woman had to have three in vitro fertilised embryos implanted in her womb at once and then abort one of them because of health risks.

The 26 year old Sicilian woman, who is very short, had a four minute operation at the Ospedale Microtemico in Cagliari, Sardinia, after a court there ruled that if the 11 week triple pregnancy continued, the mother's life would be at risk. Before the court ruling the woman had planned to travel to a London clinic and pay €1000 (£673; \$1232) for a private operation.

The fetus reduction ruling is the second reported since a law came into effect in March to put an end to Italy's reputation as the "Wild West" of infertility treatment. In June a court ruled that a Sardinian woman carrying twins should have one removed as it had the genetic disorder thalassemia, common in Sardinia.

For over two decades Italy had no legislation on infertility treatment because of a paralysing debate over the rights of the embryo in this predominantly Catholic country. Elderly women, including a 63 year old, had used the legal vacuum to travel to Italy and be helped to conceive.

Now, under the new law, only stable, heterosexual couples of child bearing age can seek infertility treatment. If they do, they can create only three embryos in one

cycle of treatment and all three must be implanted at once. Cloning, sperm donation, and surrogate motherhood are banned, and embryos cannot be tested before implantation or freezing.

Abortion, however, is legal in Italy up to 90 days into the pregnancy and later if there are health risks.

The Medically Assisted Reproduction Law—which aims to give the embryo and the mother equal rights—is seen as a victory for the Catholic Church, which draws loyal support across the Italian political spectrum. It is currently being reviewed by a parliamentary committee after it was slammed by leaders in reproductive medicine in Italy and Europe and women's rights groups.

"These cases show what is wrong with this law. It was created to protect the embryo, but what it does is force the woman to choose abortion," said Dr Giovanni Monni, who did both operations and is a board member of the European Association of Perinatal Medicine.

Stefania Prestigiacomo, minister for equal opportunities and a loyal member of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party, said she was deeply concerned about the weak points of the law. But, she told the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, after a 25 year legal vacuum "maybe it was better to pass a bad law that needs improving than never face the problem." □

Stefania Prestigiacomo, Italy's minister for equal opportunities: "Maybe it was better to pass a bad law... than never face the problem"