bmj.com news roundup

Full versions of these stories are available at: bmj.com/content/vol329/issue7458/#NEWS_ROUNDUP

Watchdog criticises unequal distribution of NHS funding

A report by independent NHS inspectors has highlighted glaring inequalities in health between rich and poor areas in England and Wales and criticises the low numbers of GPs in deprived areas, which might be expected to need doctors most.

The Healthcare Commission, which has taken over the inspection role of the Commission for Health Improvement, said that the most deprived communities were still not being funded in line with their needs, despite a government formula designed to do just that.

Inspectors found that the 2002 formula for assessing health needs—the PCT [primary care trust] revenue resource limits—was not being phased in quickly enough because the government feared the reaction from affluent areas as funds were withdrawn and redistributed to poorer districts.

For historical reasons, Easington Primary Care Trust, County Durham, was getting a fifth less than it should under the formula, a shortfall of £26.5m (\$49.3m; €39.8m). By contrast, Westminster Primary Care Trust in London received 31% over target. Such discrepancies have resulted in those most needing health advice having access to fewer doctors, the report said.

Rebecca Coombes *London*

State of Healthcare 2004, the Healthcare Commission's report is accessible at www.healthcarecommission.org.uk/NationalFindings

Two Hong Kong politicians resign in wake of SARS report

A report from Hong Kong's legislators criticising the government's handling of last year's outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) has led to two resignations.

Hong Kong's secretary for

Image of Iraqi hospital theatre wins prize

An 18 year old Iraqi man lies on the operating table at Al Karj Hospital in Iraq, two days after stepping on a land mine. This award winning photograph, taken by Javier Teniente in May 2003, is part of the 7th Luis Valtueña International Humanitarian Photography Awards, being shown in London until 30 July.

The annual award was established in Spain in 1998 by Médicos del Mundo, part of the Médecins du Monde aid organisation, as a tribute to four aid workers who were murdered while working on aid projects in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It invites adult amateur and professional photographers to send in photographs that aim to emphasise humanitarian and solidarity values.

The exhibition is at the SS Robin Trust, a charity devoted to photojournalism that operates from a steamship moored at West India Quay, Hertsmere Road, London E14 4AE. It is open Tuesdays to Saturdays, 10 am to 5 pm.

Lynn Eaton *London*

See www.medecinsdumonde.co.uk/events/index.htm for details or call the trust on 020 7538 0652.

health, welfare, and food, Dr Yeoh Eng-kiong, and the chairman of the Hospital Authority, Dr Leong Che-hung, have resigned in the wake of a report from a select committee of Hong Kong's legislative council. Last year's SARS outbreak in Hong Kong infected 1755 people and killed 299.

The report strongly criticised Dr Yeoh for not being sufficiently alert when an outbreak of atypical pneumonia occurred in Guangdong province, China, in early 2003, and for poor communication with the public at the start of the outbreak. He was also censured for failing to adequately supervise the head of the Department of Health, Dr Margaret Chan, and for failing to properly monitor the Hospital Authority.

The critical nature of the

latest report contrasts with the stance taken by a report on the outbreak commissioned by the government and published in October 2003, under the chairmanship of Cyril Chantler and Sian Griffiths, which did not apportion blame to any individuals (*BMJ* 2003;327:832).

Jane Parry *Hong Kong*

Chinese government detains doctor who criticised it

The doctor who exposed the under-reporting of cases of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in China is in custody and is being subjected to "study sessions," in which he is

being pressured to bring his views into line with those of the government.

Dr Jiang Yanyong is thought to have angered the Chinese authorities in two ways. Not only did he show that the Chinese government was failing to record accurately all SARS cases last year (*BMJ* 2003;326:839) but he also recently criticised the 1989 military crackdown on student protests in Tiananmen Square.

According to a report from Reuters news agency Dr Jiang and his wife, Hua Zhongwei, both aged 72, were detained on 1 June and were told to write down their thoughts. A source told Reuters that they were to remain in custody "as long as their thoughts had not changed."

Jane Parry *Hong Kong*

France bans reproductive and therapeutic cloning

France has banned reproductive human cloning, labelling it a "crime against the human species." It will be punishable by 30 years in prison and a fine of €7.5m (£5m; \$9.3m), drawing to an end a two and a half year parliamentary debate to modernise France's 1994 bioethics laws.

France has also banned therapeutic cloning—the creation of stem cells to replace damaged organs and tissue—making it an offence punishable by seven years in prison and a fine of €100 000.

But in a controversial about-face it suspended for five years a ban on stem cell research on human embryos (produced by in vitro fertilisation, not through cloning), to give the government time to study the ethical and medical ramifications of such research, which could lead to treatments for such illnesses as Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, and heart disease.

"The work we have accomplished has brought about a [law] that tries to find a path between the hopes of some and the fears of others," said Philippe Douste-Blazy, the health minister.

Brad Spurgeon *Paris*