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French surgeons call off strike action

The 2000 French surgeons intending to seek refuge in London in September to avoid being forced back to work during a proposed strike in France aborted their plans last week after a settlement was reached with the government.

Since June, a surgeons' union called *Chirurgiens de France* has been urging surgeons to sign up for a return trip to London for a week, starting 31 August, to avoid being forced back to work during proposed strike action. The 2000 reservations made will not be reimbursed.

"The surgeons have taken into account the measures to be taken regarding the training of young surgeons, the increase in rates for surgery, better reimbursement for patients from the healthcare system, and an improvement in working conditions," the union said in a statement calling off the strike.

The negotiations with the government led to a nine point plan to improve working conditions (including the modernisation of operating theatres) and boost recruitment. The plan will cost the state €52m (£35m; \$63m) in 2004 and €61m in 2005.

But some surgeons plan to go ahead with the strike on the grounds that the measures are insufficient.

Brad Spurgeon *Paris*

Figures show more Americans do not have insurance

More Americans than ever before—45 million—lack health insurance, and more are now living in poverty, show figures from the US Census Bureau last week.

The data, which are based on a comparison between 2002 and 2003, show that for the first time since 1995 women's average income fell and also that the ratio of women's earnings to men's earnings fell. And the number of people living below the poverty level in the United States (based on an annual

Sweetened drinks increase women's chances of having diabetes

The risk of developing type 2 diabetes among women who drank one or more cans of sugar sweetened soft drinks a day over several years is 1.83 times (95% confidence interval 1.42 to 2.36; $P < 0.001$ for the trend) the risk among women who drank less than one a month, a new study shows (*JAMA* 2004;292:927-34).

Consumption in the United States of soft drinks—the leading source of sugars in the country's diet—increased by 61% among adults from 1977 to 1997 and more than doubled in children and adolescents between the periods 1977-8 and 1994-8.

The researchers found 741 new cases of confirmed type 2 diabetes in 716 300 person years of follow up. Type 2 diabetes, which has grown rapidly in incidence in recent decades in parallel with the obesity epidemic, affects about 17 million people in the United States. Recent evidence indicates an association between consumption of sugar sweetened soft drinks and the risk of obesity in children, but data among adults is limited, especially concerning the association between consumption of such drinks and the risk of type 2 diabetes.

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

income of \$18 810 (£10 500; €15 600) or less for a family of four) increased from 34.6 million to 35.9 million.

The number of people with health insurance actually increased by a million, mostly because they were covered through government plans such as Medicare, for elderly people, or Medicaid and children's health insurance programmes for poor people.

But the percentage of the population without any health insurance rose by 1.4 million, from 43.6 million (15.2% of the population) in 2002 to 45 million (15.6%) in 2003. And the percentage of uninsured children remained at 11.4%, or 8.4 million children.

The Census Bureau's report used information from its Cur-

rent Population Survey, which surveyed 100 000 randomly selected and geographically distributed households between February and April each year.

Dr Karen Davis, an economist and health policy analyst who heads the non-profit Commonwealth Fund in New York, called the bureau's report "troubling." She said, "The trends are in the wrong direction... The number of jobs has been going up since the recession bottomed out in August 2003, but there are more uninsured: 1.4 million is a big jump from 2002 to 2003."

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2003 is accessible at www.census.gov/hhes/www/income.html

Pakistan medical association warns of potential rise in hepatitis

Doctors in Pakistan are increasingly concerned that the reuse of syringes and use of unscreened blood products could fuel a rise in cases of hepatitis.

"Our rough estimate suggests that about 15.6% of the population are carriers of hepatitis. About three million who visited public sector hospitals have hepatitis B or C. The number might be catastrophic if the entire population was screened," said Dr Umar Ayub Khan, president of the Pakistan Medical Association.

Last year, according to the association's data, the prevalence of hepatitis was just over 11%, but it is increasing at an alarming speed, said Dr Khan.

"A study by [the World Health Organization] revealed that 30% of the cases of hepatitis B and C is because of reuse of syringes by unqualified medical practitioners," said WHO's operation medical officer, Dr Saeed Akbar.

Dr Akbar said that unqualified doctors used the same syringe to inject several patients, to save money.

"Transfusion of unscreened blood at official blood banks is also a reason for the spread of hepatitis," said Dr Khan.

The health minister, Inayatullah Khan, said the government had launched an awareness campaign a year ago about preventive measures against hepatitis.

Ashfaq Yusufzai *Peshawar*

German police call off murder investigation

The case of an attempted murder of a cardiologist working at the Charité Hospital in Berlin (7 August, p 308) will probably remain unsolved.

The Berlin district attorney's spokesman, Michael Grunwald, announced last week that the investigations would be stopped as the police have no