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GMC appeals against judgment on withholding treatment

The General Medical Council filed an appeal last week against a High Court ruling which has cast doubt on key aspects of the GMC's guidance on the circumstances in which doctors can properly withhold or withdraw treatment which prolongs life.

The ruling was won last July by Leslie Burke, aged 44 (*BMJ* 2004;329:309, 7 Aug). He has cerebellar ataxia and told the court that he feared that doctors might withdraw artificial feeding and let him die if he lost the ability to communicate.

Ruling in his favour, Mr Justice Munby said the legal content of the guidance, issued in 2002, was "properly vulnerable" to criticism in some respects. It failed to acknowledge the heavy presumption in favour of life prolonging treatment, or to spell out the legal requirement in certain circumstances to get prior judicial sanction for the withdrawal of artificial nutrition and hydration.

The GMC said, "We welcomed much of the judgment, but we are concerned that some key issues are unclear... The courts are the right place to reach a clear understanding of the legal framework from which we can develop... guidance."

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

See editorial by Gillon, p 810.

Less than half the world is likely to meet target for cutting child deaths

According to a progress report from UNICEF published this week, less than half the world is on track to meet the United Nations' target to cut death rates among children aged under 5 years. The report, *Progress for Children*, also says that an estimated 11 million children are still dying needlessly every year.

In September 2000, the United Nations set several millen-

How images can enhance patients' understanding

This picture of a berry aneurysm at the base of the brain is the winning image in the Medicine and Life Award category of the 2004 Novartis and *Daily Telegraph* Visions of Science Photographic Awards.

The image, entitled *Hanging by a Thread*, was produced by Peter Keston, a neuroradiologist from the Centre for Interventional Neuroradiology of Edinburgh, who receives a £500 (\$890; €725) prize, sponsored by the *BMJ*. It shows a platinum wire coiled up inside the berry, which has been put there to block the flow of blood. Dr Keston created the image to help patients understand their condition and treatment.

Runners-up in the Medicine and Life Award include a scanning electronic micrograph showing what the absorbent side of a plaster collects from a cut, and a close-up of schistosoma parasites, the cause of the tropical disease bilharzia.

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

The exhibition will begin its tour at the Science Museum, London, on 6 October (www.visions-of-science.co.uk).

nium development goals, one of which was to reduce the 1990 death rates among the under 5s by two thirds by 2015—a fall from 93 to 31 in every 1000. Ninety countries are expected to meet this target, 53 of which are developing nations. But 98 countries are still falling far short of the 4.4% annual progress needed, says the report, most of them failing to manage even 2%. And at the current rate of progress, by 2015 the average global rate will have dropped by only around a quarter.

Inadequate health care for mothers and babies before and after birth causes the largest proportion of preventable deaths in young children, says the report, with infectious and parasitic diseases the next biggest killers.

Caroline White *London*

Progress for Children can be accessed at www.unicef.org

European Commission wants drug companies to test products for use in children

Pharmaceutical companies will have to secure special authorisation to market new drugs for children, under draft legislation tabled by the European Commission at the end of September. The proposal, which is the result of four years of widespread consultation, follows from a specific request from European Union governments to find ways to increase the number of drugs intended for use in children. Just under a quarter of the union's 480 million citizens are below 19 years of age. But over 50% of the drugs given to newborn babies or to adolescents have never

been specifically tested in these age groups.

As a result the commission maintains that doctors cannot be sure of the efficacy of the treatment, the right dose to be given, or the possible side effects when writing a prescription for a child for an untested, unauthorised product.

If approved by EU governments and the European parliament, the legislation would require drug companies to present the results of clinical trials involving children when requesting authorisation for new products.

In exchange for the extra costs involved companies would effectively be given a six month extension to their patent.

Rory Watson *Brussels*

Seven doctors accused of failing to monitor health of addicted patients

Seven doctors from a private addiction clinic were accused this week by the General Medical Council of prescribing too many drugs and of failing to adequately monitor their patients' health.

Dr Colin Brewer, now retired, and his former colleagues at the Stapleford Centre, based in London and Essex, are also accused of failing to ensure that patients took the drugs themselves, rather than selling them on.

In addition, Dr Brewer is accused of seeking to interfere with potential witnesses to the GMC's Professional Conduct Committee. It is alleged that he wrote to Professor John Strang of the National Addiction Centre and Dr Susan Ruben of the Liverpool Drug Dependency Clinic, urging them to withdraw expert reports for the GMC that criticised two other doctors from the Stapleford Centre.

Outside the tribunal, demonstrators paraded to protest against Britain's drug addiction policy. NHS clinics generally prescribe low doses of methadone, often only enough for 24 hours, and start reducing