the dosage at the outset of treatment. The Stapleford Centre adopted a more liberal approach, allowing patients to decide when they were ready to be weaned off their addiction.

Owen Dyer *London*

Czech Republic offers free beer to blood donors

A new campaign in the Czech Republic is offering people two glasses of beer in exchange for their blood in an effort to recruit blood and bone marrow donors.

Anyone donating blood as part of the "beer for blood" initiative will receive two half litre glasses of beer in return.

"Many doctors have told me about the shortage of blood stocks in hospitals, so I wanted to encourage people to donate blood and also bone tissue," the initiative's organiser, Jaroslav Novak, editor of a Czech beer magazine, said.

Mr Novak has teamed up with Prague's Vojenska Hospital and the Czech bone marrow donor registry to run the campaign, which was launched by the local development minister, Jiri Paroubek, at a beer festival.

Katka Krosnar *Prague*

US accrediting agency tightens rules for continuing medical education

The Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education, which accredits the continuing medical education (CME) courses required of most US physicians, has announced changes to limit the influence of the pharmaceutical industry. The council's seven members, including the American Medical Association, approved the changes, which affect the council's nearly 700 accredited providers of education.

The new guidance, which must be fully implemented by January 2006, has come about, in part, because leading doctors who speak on the courses often

have ties to pharmaceutical firms. Previously experts declared their industry ties, but were free to speak about off label or investigational uses of drugs—uses not approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Although speakers may still discuss such uses, they must confine their discussions to evidence based medicine.

Experts with ties to pharmaceutical companies should not be asked to make presentations on topics that involve their industry ties. The aim of the guidelines is to prevent planners with commercial interests from controlling the content of education.

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

The guidelines are available at www.acme.org/whatsnew/sec_new_nw1_255.asp for T.

GPs given go ahead to buy care for patients

General practitioners (GPs) in England have been given the go ahead to commission health services for their patients from April next year in a bid by the Department of Health to provide patients with better care.

Announcing the scheme this week, health minister John Hutton said that practice based commissioning was part of the package of measures aimed at empowering GPs to improve the quality of patient care outlined in the NHS Improvement Plan published in June.

Mr Hutton insisted that the scheme differed from GP fundholding, which Labour abolished in 1998. He said that it built on the best aspects of the former scheme while leaving out the worst.

Unlike fundholding the new scheme was open to all general practitioners and practices and offered no financial incentive to doctors themselves, he said. In addition, the introduction of the national tariff for procedures in secondary care ensured there would be no opportunity for "local haggling" among hospitals for commissions by offering "bargain basement" services as has happened in the past.

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

A quarter of young children in Iraq are chronically malnourished

Peter Moszynski *London*

A new nutritional survey shows that 27% of under 5s in Iraq have chronic malnutrition, despite the widespread distribution of food in the largest relief operation in history.

The Baseline Food Security Assessment, the first ever such survey to be done in Iraq, also found that 6.5 million people (a quarter of the population) remain highly dependent on food aid.

The assessment was done by the World Food Programme, a United Nations agency, in collaboration with Iraq's Central Statistics Office and the Ministry of Health's Nutrition Research Institute to evaluate the effectiveness of the current public distribution system that allocates food aid to most of the population.

Although the survey was done late in 2003, the results were not published until 29 September 2004. They show that, despite the widespread distribution of food aid, the prevalence of extreme poverty remains extremely high in rural areas, particularly among women and children: "Acute malnutrition (wasting rates) for children under 5 within the sample is 4.4 percent, underweight 11.5 percent, and chronic malnutrition or stunting is 27.6 percent." Without the current distribution system, this number would increase dramatically, the survey adds.

"The political environment before the war made it impos-

sible to analyse the level of poverty and hunger in the country," explained Torben Due, the World Food Programme's director of operations in Iraq. "For the first time, we are getting an accurate picture of people's access to food. As a result, we are much better able to plan assistance."

Paul Hetherington of Save the Children, one of the few agencies still operational in Iraq, told the *BMJ*, "These figures are clearly very shocking. Fifteen per cent under 5 chronic malnutrition is considered an emergency; for a middle income country like Iraq, a figure of 27% is quite astounding."

"It's almost as high as the current rates of 30% in Darfur. Iraq is one of the world's most difficult countries for aid agencies to operate and it's almost impossible for us to carry out routine humanitarian operations."

The World Food Programme pointed out, "Years of international sanctions and nearly two decades of wars have destroyed Iraq's economy. Today's security situation is hampering effective social and economic recovery."

"Despite receiving food rations from Iraq's Public Distribution System, these people are still struggling to cope," said Mr Due. "Although food is generally available, the poorest households cannot afford to buy from the markets." □

Years of international sanctions and war, combined with today's security situation, have contributed to serious malnutrition in Iraq