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Six GPs who signed cremation forms for Shipman face GMC

Six GPs who countersigned cremation forms for the GP Harold Shipman failed to detect suspicious circumstances in the deaths of his patients and missed numerous opportunities to stop Shipman's 23 year career of murder, the General Medical Council's professional conduct committee heard this week.

Peter Bennett, Rajesh Patel, Jeremy Dirckze, Stephen Farrar, Alastair MacGillivray, and Susan Booth, all from Hyde, Greater Manchester, worked in surgeries close to Shipman's practices at Donneybrook and Market Street. All six deny serious professional misconduct.

Nigel Grundy, for the GMC, told the hearing in Manchester that the six GPs and Shipman had a reciprocal arrangement to countersign each other's cremation forms.

He said that when patients who die an apparently natural death are released for cremation, their doctor has to sign a cremation form, known as Form B, giving the cause and circumstances of death. A second doctor then has to countersign a Form C, having scrutinised the comments in Form B.

Between them the six doctors signed 240 of Shipman's Form Cs over a period of 18 years. The Shipman inquiry later ruled that 124 of those patients had been unlawfully killed.

Owen Dyer *London*

Drug industry is not tackling threats to public health, says WHO

Profit driven drug companies are not developing enough drugs and vaccines to tackle two major threats to public health—influenza and resistance to antibacterial drugs—that could kill millions of people across the globe, the World Health Organization says in a new report.

The Geneva based agency

Landmine casualties are falling, but the wounded need more help, report says

The number of reported casualties from landmines in 2003 fell in most countries affected by mines, a new report from the International Campaign to Ban Landmines says. The total number of reported casualties fell from 8333 in 2002 to 8065 in 2003, though the real figure, including unreported cases, is thought to be much higher.

Princess Diana (pictured) angered government ministers when she called for an international ban on landmines on a visit to Angola in 1997. The campaign's report, *Landmine Monitor*, shows that since the treaty took effect five years ago use of mines has fallen considerably around the world.

But as campaigners gather in Nairobi, Kenya for a conference to review the effect of the 1997 Ottawa Convention on Landmines, activists say that more needs to be done, particularly for landmine victims.

Peter Moszynski *Nairobi*

Landmine Monitor is available at www.icbl.org

has called for urgent action to tackle these two and 15 other diseases and conditions for which it says treatments do not exist, are inadequate, or are not reaching patients.

David Laing, of WHO's Essential Medicines and Policy Department and one of the report's authors, said that more research was needed to develop heat resistant drugs for people living in areas with little or no refrigeration in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. New, fixed dose combination drugs are also needed, particularly for HIV and AIDS, says the report.

The industry gave the report a cautious welcome.

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

Priority Medicines for Europe and the World Project can be found at <http://mednet3.who.int/prioritymeds/report/index.htm>

Government programmes driven by politics not evidence, report says

The government's assertion that its programmes to tackle social exclusion and health inequalities are strongly based on evidence and on "what works" has been challenged in a new report from the independent health think tank the King's Fund.

Complex, community based initiatives such as "Sure Start" and the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal are designed by "informed guesswork and expert hunches ... enriched by some evidence and driven by political and other imperatives," says the report.

Many of the professionals interviewed for the research felt that political values played a greater part than evidence in developing programmes. The report states that Sure Start, which aims to provide child care, early education, and parenting support for children up to 3 years old, ignored most of the evidence from its US equivalent, Head Start.

Anna Coote, the King's Fund director of health policy and an author of the report, told the *BMJ* that what is also needed is "much more honesty and openness about how limited the evidence base is."

Ann McGauran *London*

Finding Out What Works: Building Knowledge about Complex, Community-Based Initiatives is available to buy from www.kingsfund.org.uk

Review of child care cases finds few instances that raise "serious doubt"

An official review of more than 30 000 cases of children in England and Wales who were either taken from their parents and put into care or are currently involved in care proceedings has found just a handful of cases that raise serious doubts about the reliability of disputed medical evidence.

In only one case so far has a care plan for a child been changed as a result of the review.

The results show that media speculation that some 5000 care orders might be reopened on the basis of flawed medical advice was seriously wide of the mark.

The nine month investigation was ordered last January after the Court of Appeal quashed the conviction of Angela Cannings, a mother who was jailed for life for killing her two baby sons (*BMJ* 2004;328:183).

The court declared in the Cannings case that no prosecutions should be launched in future where reputable medical experts disagreed on the cause of death and no other cogent evidence was forthcoming.

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*