In brief

Swiss approve stem cell research: Two thirds of Swiss voters backed a 2003 Swiss law in a national referendum last Sunday giving the green light to scientists in Switzerland to conduct stem cell research on human embryos left over from infertility treatment. The move was seen as a boost to Switzerland's powerful pharmaceutical and healthcare sectors.

Bhutan bans tobacco: Bhutan, the landlocked Himalayan kingdom, has become the first nation in the world to ban tobacco. A law passed last week by the health ministry made the sale of tobacco illegal and imposed a fine of £122 (\$232; €175) on anyone caught breaking the ban.

WHO urges countries to act on avian flu: The World Health Organization has warned that 25% to 30% of the world's population could be affected by the next influenza pandemic, with seven million deaths a conservative estimate. At a meeting of 13 Asian countries in Bangkok, it urged Asian governments to take urgent action to avert the threat from H5N1 avian flu, which threatens to mutate into a virulent human form of flu.

NHS trust investigated: An investigation has been launched by the Healthcare Commission into allegations of failings at the East Sussex Hospitals NHS Trust. The trust runs the Eastbourne District General Hospital. The inquiry follows allegations of unfair treatment of some staff by managers. See www.healthcarecommission.org.uk

Girls binge on alcohol more than boys: The number of teenage girls bingeing on alcohol has overtaken rates among boys for the first time, UK figures show. A third of 15 and 16 year old girls admitted at least one binge drinking experience in the last month, compared with a quarter of boys. The team from the European school survey project on alcohol and drugs interviewed more than 2000 pupils last year.

Drug related deaths in Europe are falling

Rory Watson *Brussels*

The number of drug related deaths across Europe has fallen after rising for several years; heroin use in many countries has stabilised; and the HIV epidemic among injecting drug users in central and eastern Europe is slowing down.

In addition, measures to reduce drug related harm are intensifying, and drug users across Europe have better access to treatment and care.

These are the main findings to emerge from the latest annual report from the Lisbon based European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, released on 25 November.

Georges Estievenart, the European Union's drug agency's director, warned, however, that some of the positive trends could be short lived: "We should not forget that drug use in general remains at historically high levels. Many countries are reporting rising cocaine use, and more people are using cannabis and ecstasy in parts of Europe," he explained.

The report indicates that after reaching a peak in 2000 with 8838 reported drug related deaths, such deaths declined between 2000 and 2001-2 in many EU countries, especially Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Portugal. The fall may be reversed, however, with the arrival in the European Union of 10 new member states earlier this year. Misuse of drugs is increasing in Slovenia and Estonia, for instance.

Cannabis remains the most common illegal drug in Europe, with some three million people using it on a daily basis. Roughly

one in five adult Europeans had tried it at least once in their lifetime.

Among young people (15-34 years), prevalence of cannabis use ranges from less than 15% in Estonia, Portugal, and Sweden to 35% or more in Denmark, Spain, France, and the United Kingdom. Some 30% of 15-16 year old school pupils in the United Kingdom, France, and Spain have tried the drug. □

Annual Report 2004: The State of the Drugs Problem in the European Union and Norway is available at www.emcdda.eu.int

Drug misuse in Canada has increased in the past decade

Barbara Kermode-Scott *Ottawa*

Self reported rates of use of alcohol, cannabis, and other drugs have increased in Canada in the past decade, says a new national population survey report.

Alcohol and cannabis continue to be the most commonly used drugs, says the Canadian addiction survey, the first major survey in a decade on the use of alcohol and other drugs among Canadians aged 15 and older. Canada's first national survey of licit and illicit drug use by Canadians (the alcohol and other drugs survey) was done in 1994.

A total of 13 909 Canadians from across the country took part in telephone interviews for

the latest study between December 2003 and April 2004. It focused on the impact that alcohol and drug use has on physical, mental, and social wellbeing.

Overall, 45% of Canadians reported using cannabis at least once during their lifetime. Fourteen per cent of Canadians reported using cannabis in the past year, nearly double the rate reported in 1994 (7%). Of these, almost 46% had not used cannabis or had used it only once or twice in the three months preceding the interview. However, 18% of users in the past year reported daily use.

Reported rates in youths show that almost 30% of 15-17

year olds and more than 47% of 18-19 year olds said they had used cannabis in the past year. Almost 70% of survey participants between ages 18 and 24 reported having used cannabis at least once. The prevalence of lifetime use of cannabis increases with education and income, the study found. Also, people who had never been married were more likely to use cannabis.

"The rise in cannabis use, especially among young Canadians, is of concern because we know that cannabis is not a benign substance," said Michel Perron, chief executive officer of the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. "There are a number of health risks associated with use." □

The report, *A National Survey of Canadians' Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs*, is available at www.ccsa.ca/pdf/ccsa-004804-2004.pdf