States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany, had assembled to discuss these issues with congressional and policy staff in Washington, DC.

"While there is a lot of data out there, unfortunately it is often very poor," said Dr Peter Littlejohns, director of the UK's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. This leads to an evaluation that is based more on cost than on effectiveness.

Given that policy decisions will be based on imperfect information, what is the tolerance of error, and what kind of error (false positives and false negatives) can be tolerated, asked Dr Marc Berger, a vice president for research with the drug company Merck.

He argued that the answers are likely to vary, depending on the severity of the medical condition and what treatment options were available. Involving all stakeholders in setting priorities and in determining the methods and the degrees of certainty needed to reach conclusions is integral to building trust in final recommendations, he said.

Bob Roehr *Washington, DC*

Queensland considers how to improve checks on foreign doctors

The Queensland government will hold a royal commission into the issues arising from the appointment of a surgeon to a senior hospital post who had a history of "gross negligence" in the United States.

In 2003 Dr Jayant Patel, who trained in India, was appointed to the post of director of surgery at Bundaberg Base Hospital, Bundaberg, in central Queensland, at a salary of \$A200 000 (£82 000; \$160 000; €120 000).

Queensland's chief health officer, Dr Gerry FitzGerald, has confirmed that over the next two years at least 14 of Patel's several hundred patients experienced major complications and three died, although nursing staff estimated that Dr Patel could have been involved in as many as 20 deaths.

In early 2003 the Queensland Medical Board approved Dr Patel's application to practise on the basis of a certificate of good standing from Oregon. However, Queensland officials overlooked an annotation mentioning that other details were attached, but which Dr Patel had not submitted. The attachment listed findings against Dr Patel in the United States. Nor did the Queensland officials check Dr Patel's US records, even though some are available on the internet.

Dr Bill Glasson, president of the Australian Medical Association, said that the case highlights the need for more rigorous standards for checking the credentials of overseas trained doctors.

Bob Burton *Canberra*

It's official: family doctors are good for your health

Contrary to a widespread belief that doctors do more harm than good—borne out by declines in mortality during doctors' strikes—a new study shows that doctors actually do save lives. Its results show that one additional primary care doctor in an area can lower mortality in that area by around 2%.

The authors, from Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, the US Department of Health and Human Services at Bethesda, Maryland, and New York University, say that their results indicate that increasing resources for primary care may be one way to help offset the effects of disadvantage on health and that primary care can help reduce socioeconomic disparities.

The research showed that across the United States mortality fell by 14.4 deaths per 100 000 people during an 11 year period when the number of primary care doctors increased by one for every 10 000 people (*Social Science & Medicine* 2005;61:65-75).

"The study provides evidence that primary care resources are associated with population health and could aid in reducing socioeconomic disparities," the report says.

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Parents fail to overturn ruling not to resuscitate baby

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

The parents of a terminally ill baby failed in the high court in London last week to persuade a judge to overturn an order he made six months ago allowing doctors to let her die if she stops breathing.

Darren and Debbie Wyatt vowed to appeal against Mr Justice Hedley's ruling that it would still not be in 18 month old Charlotte's best interests to ventilate and intubate her if she has a respiratory crisis, even though her condition has improved in the six months since he made the order.

Charlotte weighed less than 500 g and measured only 12 cm long when she was born three months prematurely in October 2003. She has serious brain, lung, and kidney damage and is at the centre of a battle over her treatment between her parents and St Mary's Hospital, Portsmouth, which is caring for her.

But Mr and Mrs Wyatt, from Portsmouth, argue that their daughter has confounded doctors' predictions that she would not survive the winter and should be given every chance to live.

The judge accepted that she now needed only 50% oxygen, delivered in a head box, instead of the nearly 100% she needed when he made the order last October.

Then she was "almost wholly unresponsive, in deep discomfort, requiring almost continu-

ous sedation, and her condition could properly have been described as intolerable." Now she did not usually require sedation, was able to respond to stimulation, could see and hear to a limited extent, and her life could not be called intolerable.

But Charlotte, who now weighs less than 8 kg, was still ill with a chronic respiratory disease that was expected to be fatal, the judge said.

He was convinced by the majority medical opinion that she was unlikely to survive even with ventilation. If she did, it would be at the cost of major deterioration in her condition, and her life would again become intolerable. It would not be in her best interests "to die in the course of futile aggressive treatment."

The judge said he had decided to take the decision now rather than waiting, as the parents argued, until a crisis arose.

Relations between the parents—who have two other children, Daniel, aged 2 years, and David, 6 months—and the hospital were very fragile, said the judge. Hospital staff were distressed by Charlotte's plight and, as they saw it, the "volatility" of her parents. Mr Wyatt had to be accompanied by a security guard on each visit to Charlotte. It would be wholly contrary to her best interests for a crisis, when it came, to be "overshadowed by a major legal conflict," the judge said. □

Debbie and Darren Wyatt, parents of the seriously ill baby Charlotte, appear with their solicitor Richard Stein between them outside the Royal Courts of Justice in London last week