In brief

UK elderly care is failing:

Health care for elderly people is underfunded and understaffed, an independent report on services in London has warned. The report by the King's Fund, *The Business of Caring*, said that the problem would worsen in the next 20 years unless urgent action was taken. Its year long investigation found poor access to care and support and wrangles over who should pay. (www.kingsfund.org.uk).

Cinanserin can inhibit SARS

virus: A joint Chinese and European research team based in Hangzhou, China, have discovered that cinanserin, a serotonin antagonist tested in the 1960s for treating schizophrenia, can inhibit the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) coronavirus and could be used as a treatment in future outbreaks (*Journal of Virology* 2005;79:7095-103).

Researcher fined for shredding records:

Christopher Gillberg, a world expert on attention hyperactivity deficit disorder, has been given a conditional sentence and fined approximately Kr35 000 (£2500; \$4500; €3700) by the district court in Gothenberg, Sweden. Professor Gillberg permitted the shredding of his research data on the disorder because disclosure would breach patient confidentiality, despite court orders granting access to view the records.

Scottish GPs increase earnings with out of hours work:

GPs in Scotland are earning up to £180 an hour for treating patients in the evening, during the night, and at weekends, figures from Scottish health boards show. Out of hours working is not compulsory for GPs since the start of this year, and they are paid extra for this service.

Israel sets up breast milk bank:

Israel's health ministry is to establish what will reputedly be the world's first breast milk bank. It will replace a handful of small unsupervised banks supplied voluntarily by multiparous ultra-Orthodox Jewish women to infants whose mothers who cannot or who are unwilling to breast feed.

Israeli doctors want to stop European patent for genetic test

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich *Jerusalem*

Israeli oncologists and geneticists are trying to prevent the European Patent Office from granting a patent to a US company for a genetic test for the BRCA1 mutation, on the grounds that it may be racist. The mutation is responsible for a high risk of breast and ovarian cancer in Jewish women of Ashkenazi (European) origin. The hearing was scheduled for Wednesday 29 June in Munich.

Registering a patent for a genetic test that identifies a mutation typical only of Jews of Ashkenazi background is "a racist idea that may cause discrimination in Israel and around the world against these women," said Eliezer Robinson, chairman of the Israel Cancer Association and of Israel's National Oncology Council, and Dorit Lev, head of the Israel Association of Medical Geneticists. Both sent the petition via Oded Eran, Israel's ambassador to the European Union.

Coloured immunofluorescent light micrograph of the BRCA1 gene

"The reasons behind registering the above patent are solely economic and have no medical ramifications," they added. The US company was able to develop its test on the basis of scientific research conducted for decades around the world, and it belonged to the world, they suggested.

Myriad Genetics, based in Utah, holds a patent in the United States for the test, which costs \$500 (£270; €410). In Israel,

where there is no patent protection, the same kit costs the equivalent of about \$70. Israel's four public health funds currently supply it free to people at high risk of being carriers because of their family history, but the patent could force them to stop paying for it, Dr Lev said.

Israel has an estimated 35 000 female carriers and an equal number of male carriers, who have a somewhat higher risk of prostate cancer as a result.

One per cent of Ashkenazi Jewish women carry the mutation, which is tested from a simple blood sample. Among Jewish women of Ashkenazi origin, there are very few genetic changes in the relevant genes, explained Professor Robinson and Dr Lev, making it easy and quick to identify women at high risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer. A negative result has greatly reassured women from families with multiple cases of breast or ovarian cancer, the Israeli experts said.

The risk of these women contracting breast cancer is about 50%-80%, compared with a risk of 12% for the general population in Israel and throughout the world. □

UK government consults on primary care

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

The views of thousands of people on primary care are to be gathered by the Department of Health later this summer in a consultation exercise. These views will help to inform a white paper, to be published at the turn of the year.

Patricia Hewitt, the health secretary, said that this would be a "major public engagement exercise" to help shape the future of all NHS services provided outside hospitals, including GPs' surgeries, walk-in centres, and social and community care.

Doctors and other staff groups will be invited to "briefing events" before September to express their views and listen to how the public consultation will work, a process that they will also be able to feed into as mem-

bers of the public themselves.

Speaking to a conference in London last week—Britain Speaks: Effective Public Engagement and Better Decision Making—Ms Hewitt said, "I want to genuinely involve patients, public, and staff in designing family health and social care to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This will be a major, large scale deliberative event taking place at the local, regional, and national level—beyond anything the government has embarked upon before in the health field."

The Department of Health will go out to tender for a private company to organise the public engagement part of the exercise, but it is envisaging holding town hall meetings, an approach sometimes used in the United States.

"I know that some people say the public aren't interested in going to lots more meetings," added Ms Hewitt. "What they want is really good services that they don't have to worry about. That's true, but only partly true. Of course, people don't want to go to boring meetings, listen to speeches, and feel they haven't

been listened to themselves. But I'm increasingly struck by how many people do want to be involved. They know, as we should know, that they are the real experts in their own lives and their own communities."

Ms Hewitt said that the government would build on its experience in engaging the public in other initiatives such as Sure Start, the New Deal for Communities, and tackling anti-social behaviour.

A spokesperson for the BMA's General Practitioners Committee said, "We will be using every opportunity to contribute to the consultation surrounding the forthcoming white paper on family health services. No one is better placed than the family doctor to coordinate the care of patients in the community. The UK system of GP practices, with registered lists of patients, has proved itself to be both cost effective and adaptive to change."

The Department of Health said that a consultation document would be put on its website in the next few weeks. □