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Routine vaccination for tuberculosis ends in UK

The UK government is to end routine vaccination against tuberculosis for schoolchildren and switch to targeted jabs for those most at risk, the chief medical officer for England, Liam Donaldson, announced last week.

From September, the BCG vaccination will be reserved for babies born or living in areas where the incidence of tuberculosis is at least 40 per 100 000 people. Children whose parents or grandparents have lived in a country with a tuberculosis prevalence rate of at least 40 per 100 000 people will also be offered the jab, as will unprotected immigrants.

Tuberculosis once accounted for one in eight UK deaths but was largely eradicated by the 1980s. However, it has increased by 25% in the past decade with about 7000 people, mainly immigrant groups and the homeless, diagnosed as having tuberculosis each year.

The UK is the only country in Europe that still vaccinates young teenagers, despite evidence indicating that mass immunisation of this age group confers little benefit.

"Young children are now the higher risk group," said Professor Donaldson. "Those under 12 months who are exposed to infection have a 43% chance of progressing to full blown [tuberculosis]. Children aged one to five have a 24% risk."

Pat Hagan *London*

Lack of staff and poor organisation blamed for excess deaths in a London hospital

A shortage of midwives and obstetricians, poor working relationships, and failure to follow guidelines were blamed for maternal deaths at a London hospital in a review published last week by the Healthcare

Weight reduction surgery quadruples in US in four years to nearly 72 000 operations

The number of US residents undergoing surgery for weight loss more than quadrupled between 1998 and 2002—from 13 386 to 71 733, including a 900% increase in operations on patients aged 55-64, says the first national estimate based on hospital and insurance claims data (*Health Affairs* 2005;24:1039-46).

The study, from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, showed that bariatric surgery—which restricts the size of the stomach and bypasses parts of the intestines to reduce food absorption—is one of the fastest growing surgical procedures.

Hospital costs for bariatric surgery increased more than sixfold over the four year period, from \$157m (£90m; €131m) to \$948m a year, with the largest increase in costs for surgery covered by Medicaid (17.7%). However, only a small fraction of those medically eligible for bariatric surgery had it.

Andy Schlesinger of North Miami Beach (above) is someone who lost weight following stomach reducing surgery. He weighed 700lbs at the time of surgery and 200lbs 15 months later.

With more effective drugs being developed for obesity, and the increasing safety of bariatric surgery, usage of both treatments could greatly increase, with important implications for Medicare, say the authors.

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

Commission. The review was requested after seven women cared for by North West London Hospitals NHS Trust died in pregnancy or within 42 days of delivery, miscarriage, or termination of pregnancy between April 2002 and December 2003.

The Healthcare Commission, which leads investigations into healthcare provision by the NHS in England, identified staff shortages in maternity services as a key problem. The trust had been unable to provide one midwife per woman during labour and consultants were not always available on labour wards because some had reduced their obstetrics work to specialise in gynaecology.

The report called for urgent action to tackle the staff shortage, including a workforce development plan to meet current and future needs. A full time consultant should provide clinical leadership on the labour

ward, particularly for high risk women. Cover by consultants on the labour ward should be increased to 60 hours per week.

The review also recommended immediate introduction of a new information system and use of up to date clinical guidelines. Susan Mayor *London*

Software company defends sale of patients' data to drug companies

Australia's largest retailer of specialist software for general practitioners has sought to quell disquiet over the sale of information from patients' electronic files to consultants advising the drug industry.

In an email to doctors, Edmund Bateman, the managing director of Primary Health

Care, a healthcare services company, said, "it is offensive to suggest we are interested in providing confidential records to anyone."

More than 16 000 GPs in Australia use a software program, Medical Director, sold by Health Communications Network, a subsidiary of Primary Health Care, to write more than 90 million prescriptions each year. The software includes a data extraction tool allowing anonymised patient data to be accessed.

In October last year, the Australian Consumers Association complained to the Australian Privacy Commissioner that the data extraction breached privacy laws.

The privacy commissioner accepted assurances that individuals could not be identified and ruled that privacy legislation had not been breached. However, the chairwoman of the Australian Medical Association's ethics committee, Dr Rosanna Capolingua, was concerned about doctors selling patients' information to inform drug company marketing.

Bob Burton *Canberra*

Assembly meets to tackle health needs of the poor

More than a thousand members of the People's Health Movement—a global advocacy network of people's organisations—from 90, mostly poor, countries will meet at the People's Health Assembly in Cuenca, Ecuador, next week.

The first People's Health Assembly, held in Bangladesh in 2000, attracted almost 1500 health activists. It was convened by Zafarullah Chowdhury to discuss the failure to achieve the goal of health for all by the year 2000 (*BMJ* 2004;329:1127).

The assembly in Cuenca will continue the debate on how to narrow the growing health and wealth divide between rich and poor countries. It will reinforce the call to take radical action to counteract the underlying economic, social, political, and environmental drivers of the divide.

Tessa Richards *London*