bmj.com news roundup

Full versions of these stories are available at: **bmj.com/content/vol325/issue7375/#NEWS_ROUNDUP**

Gynaecologist is struck off for sterilising women without their consent

A gynaecologist in England who sterilised patients against their wishes was last week struck off the medical register by the General Medical Council.

Michael Pembrey, aged 56, was found to have sterilised five women without obtaining proper consent, including one patient with a severe learning disability and another with Down's syndrome. The case was heard in October, but had been adjourned (19 October, p 854).

The allegations covered the period 1989-99, when Mr Pembrey worked as a consultant at the Conquest Hospital in Hastings, East Sussex. He was also found to have carried out an incompetent sterilisation on a woman in 1995 that later resulted in an ectopic pregnancy. Another patient, who consented to laparoscopic sterilisation in 1999, later required hysterectomy after Mr Pembrey perforated her uterus with an intrauterine device.

Owen Dyer *London*

EU parliament votes for total ban on tobacco advertising

The European Union is on course to impose a total ban on tobacco advertising in newspapers and magazines and on the radio and internet within three years.

The draft legislation received a large majority in the European parliament on 20 November and will now be considered by EU governments. It represents a major victory for David Byrne, the European public health commissioner, who has made the fight against tobacco one of his top priorities.

The legislation is designed to replace earlier measures, which the European Court of Justice had partially annulled on the grounds that the union had overstepped its powers (*BMJ* 2000;320:1691). The commission has trimmed its earlier proposal and now believes the latest version is legally watertight.

The ban, supported by 309 votes to 203 with 39 abstentions, would take effect from 1 August 2005.

Rory Watson *Brussels*

NORTH NEWS AND PICTURES

Paediatrician suspended after she "threw objectivity to the winds"

A senior consultant paediatrician has been suspended from her job pending an independent review of her clinical practice after she was strongly criticised by a High Court judge for her role in wrongly branding two former day nursery workers guilty of abusing their charges.

Camille San Lazaro has been suspended by Newcastle Hospitals NHS Trust, which has commissioned the inquiry into her practice.

Last July nursery workers Christopher Lillie and Dawn Reed won High Court libel damages of £200 000 ($316 000; €317 000) each against the four members of a review team appointed by Newcastle City Council, which concluded that they were members of a paedophile ring and had sexually abused children in their care at the city's Shieldfield nursery (*BMJ* 2002:325:235).

Mr Justice Eady, the judge who heard the libel case, described the review team's report as a "shambles" and said the team "clearly fell under the spell" of Dr San Lazaro.

She examined 53 of the Shieldfield children and concluded that several showed signs of sexual or other abuse. She was not a member of the review team, but its report drew on her findings.

Mr Justice Eady said in his judgment: "The truth is that, where physical findings were negative or equivocal, Dr San Lazaro was prepared to make up the deficiencies by throwing objectivity and scientific rigour to the winds in a highly emotional misrepresentation of the facts."

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

New life form to be created

Genetics researcher Dr Craig Venter, who gained international attention when his company, Celera Genomics, beat the non-profit Human Genome Project in the race to sequence the human genome, recently revealed that he intends to create a new living organism.

Dr Venter and Nobel laureate Professor Hamilton Smith have received the go ahead from an ethics committee and a $3m (£1.9m; €3m) grant from the US Department of Energy to pursue the project.

The ethics committee, which is known as the Ethics of Genomics Group, is funded by an "unrestricted grant" from The Institute of Genomics Research (TIGR), based in Rockville, Maryland, a research institute, which Venter founded.

The scientists plan to modify a simple bacterium, *Mycoplasma genitalium*, by stripping it of its DNA and replacing it with artificially created chromosomes. By eliminating the bacterium's genes bit by bit and analysing those genes, the scientists hope to discover which genes are essential for life and which are disposable or optional.

The plan, which was reported in the *Washington Post* (22 November, p C11), is expected to provide insights into basic biology but has prompted concerns about ethics and fears that the findings may be misused by bioterrorists.

Deborah Josefson *Nebraska*

Safeguards in research needed to protect patients' privacy

Safeguards to protect patient information need to be built in to the use of secondary data in health research, but asking everyone whether it is acceptable for their information to be used in research that involves large databases is impractical.

That is the finding of a report published by the Nuffield Trust, that seeks to provide guidance on using medical data for research purposes—the subject of a contentious debate.

Advocates claim that it is in the best interests of the public that personal data are collected and monitored. Disease surveillance, evaluation of healthcare services, and drug safety analyses depend on the secondary use of medical information. Campaigners for privacy, on the other hand, argue