In brief

US Supreme Court bans medical use of marijuana: The Supreme Court in Washington state ruled this week that marijuana was a controlled substance under federal law and could be used legally only in government approved research projects. It ruled that cannabis clubs in California should not be allowed to provide marijuana for patients.

The pill could become a patch: A skin patch that delivers hormones may soon be available to women as an alternative to the contraceptive pill. In a study of more than 1400 women in the United States and Canada, researchers found that the contraceptive patch was as effective as oral contraception in preventing pregnancy and was easier for women to use (*JAMA* 2001;285:2347-54).

Low vitamin levels may raise risk of Alzheimer's: Elderly people with low blood levels of vitamin B-12 and folate may face an increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease, researchers have found. The findings suggested that monitoring older people's levels of the vitamins may help to prevent the disease (*Neurology* 2001;56:1188-94).

Ireland tightens sales of paracetamol: The Republic of Ireland has replaced its voluntary sales restrictions on paracetamol with a regulatory code requiring "blister pack" packaging, and banning the sale of multiple packs in a single sale and sales through vending machines. One drug company has already challenged the restrictions.

AMA honours Richard Doll: The American Medical Association has awarded the 2001 Outstanding International Physician award to Professor Richard Doll, a leading cancer epidemiologist from Oxford. The award is one of the Dr Nathan Davis international awards in medicine and public health, which honour physicians and health initiatives that further health information and medical practice worldwide.

US spending on prescription drugs rose by 19% in 2000

Fred Charatan *Florida*

Americans spent $132bn (£94bn) on prescription drugs last year, an increase of $20.8bn (18.8%) over 1999. Spending on prescription drugs in the United Kingdom in 2000 was £7bn.

A study by the National Institute for Health Care Management Foundation, a non-profit making, independent group that conducts research on healthcare issues, found that the increase in spending "was attributable in large measure to the rising volume of prescriptions for the top-selling drugs." Researchers at the institute have previously shown that more aggressive marketing by drug companies is contributing to the growth (*BMJ* 2000;321:783).

The top sellers included the arthritis drug rofecoxib (Vioxx; Merck), the arthritis drug celecoxib (Celebrex; Pharmacia Pfizer), the antiulcer drug lansoprazole (Prevacid; TAP Pharmaceuticals), the cholesterol reducer atorvastatin (Lipitor; Pfizer), and the antidiabetic drug metformin hydrochloride (Glucophage; Bristol-Myers Squibb). The increase in sales of these five drugs alone accounted for a fifth of the entire increase in sales of prescription drugs last year, the study said.

It found that three main factors accounted for the overall rise in spending—an increase in the number of prescriptions written by doctors (accounting for 42%), a shift towards the use of more expensive drugs (36%), and price increases (22%).

The rapid growth in spending on prescription drugs has pushed up health insurance premiums for individuals and families, has contributed to increases in the cost of health benefits provided by employers, and has driven up the cost of Medicaid, the joint federal and state programme for people on low incomes.

It has sharpened the political debate on new prescription drug benefits for Medicare patients (those aged over 65). President Bush has proposed spending $153bn on drug benefits and unspecified Medicare reforms over the next 10 years. Democrats say that the sum is totally inadequate.

Alan Holmer, president of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, the main trade association for the drug companies, said, "This report should be hailed as good news" because it means that "more patients are getting more and better medicines." He said that the report confirmed what many patients had discovered for themselves—that "prescription medicines are the best value in health care today, allowing patients to stay out of the hospital, off the surgery table, on the job, and in the home." □

The study can be accessed at www.nihcm.org

Foreigners flock to Cuba for medical care

Fred Charatan *Florida*

CHARLIE MARSDEN/PANOS PICTURES

Cuba: ideal for sun, sea and plastic surgery

Foreigners seeking medical treatment are flocking to Havana, lured by advertisements and lower costs. Cuban officials have said that 3500 foreigners came for health care last year.

"People with a lot of money are looking for our services," said Dr Carlos Leyvsa, vice president of Cubanacan Tourism and Health. "For them it's not an issue of price but of quality."

Cira Garcia is a clinic adjoining Havana's wealthy Miramar section, which last year attracted nearly 1300 foreign tourists as inpatients and thousands more as outpatients. Its website proclaims that it is a "leading healthcare organisation for foreigners."

Cira Garcia offers everything from herniated disc repair—for $4750 (£3400) including anaesthesia and a two week hospital stay—to laser eye surgery and liposuction.

Dr Ramon Prado, the clinic director, said that its prices average about a third lower than those in the United States. For example, according to the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, in 1999 rhinoplasty cost $3100 in the United States compared with $1710 at Cira Garcia, and abdominoplasty ("tummy tuck") cost $4198 in the United States compared with $2340 at the clinic.

About 80% of the patients come from Latin America and the Caribbean, but the facility has attracted patients from as far away as Japan and Finland.

Cuba's increasing promotion of health tourism has roused criticism by those who see a two tier health system developing. In a country with one of the highest concentrations of doctors in the world, foreigners and Cuban party elite receive first class service. But ordinary Cubans must make do with dilapidated facilities, outdated equipment, and meagre medical supplies, in part because of the longstanding US embargo against Cuba.

Cuban officials defend their system, however, saying that the $20m or more that the foreign tourists bring to the island each year bolsters Cuba's general finances and helps to support free universal health care for Cuban workers and their families. □