In brief

UK plans dental access centres: The Department of Health is providing £340 000 ($544 000) for 34 more dental access centres to provide fast and flexible access to NHS dentists. Two centres were launched as pilots in 1998.

Canada to sue tobacco industry: Canada's federal government is suing major tobacco companies for allegedly conspiring to smuggle hundreds of millions of dollars worth of cigarettes into Canada, thus damaging the country's national strategy to reduce tobacco consumption. The suit seeks at least $C1bn (£444m; $711m) from RJR-Macdonald, RJ Reynolds Tobacco Holdings, several related companies, and the Canadian Tobacco Manufacturers Council.

Hungary faces meningitis epidemic: The largest meningitis outbreak in Hungary's history has claimed at least five lives and many people have been sent to hospital. The outbreak erupted shortly before Christmas at an army barracks in central Hungary.

Cost of NHS hospital treatment varies: The cost of treatment for lower back pain that includes a stay in hospital in the NHS in England varies from £638 ($1020) to £1578, according to the Department of Health's *National Schedule of Reference Costs 1999*. The cost of a day case vasectomy ranged from £244 to £398, and the cost of treating an emergency admission for bronchopneumonia ranged from £828 to £1617.

MP introduces bill on paediatric prescribing: Andrew Love, Labour MP for Edmonton in North London, introduced a bill in the British parliament aimed at reducing the risk to children from unlicensed and untested medicines. The bill follows a survey showing that two thirds of children in European hospitals receive unlicensed drugs (*BMJ* 2000:320:79-82).

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Cloned calves are grown from cultured cells

Susan Mayor *London*

Six cloned calves have been created from cells cultured in vitro for up to three months, confirming previous work showing that relatively "old" cells can be used to clone whole animals.

The achievement confirms the possibility of being able to carry out targeted genetic manipulations in vitro—taking out specific genes and replacing them with other ones—because this requires prolonged culture of nuclear donor cells.

A research team working in Japan and the United States has reported the birth of six clones of a 17 year old Japanese Black Beef bull, using ear skin fibroblast cells as nuclear donor cells.

These cells were used after up to three months of in vitro culture, representing 10 to 15 culture passages. The four surviving clones are now 7 to 9 months old and seem normal, with no apparent differences compared with their peers produced by natural reproduction, according to the research team, whose results are due to appear shortly in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Professor Jerry Yang, director of the Transgenic Animal Facility at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, and member of the research team, commented: "These data show that fibroblasts of aged animals remain competent for cloning and prolonged culture does not affect the cloning competence of adult somatic donor cells."

He said that the demonstration of genetic totipotency of cells after prolonged culture is pivotal to combining site specific genetic manipulations and cloning.

The research suggested that long term storage of cells might even have been beneficial. Higher developmental rates for embryos derived from later passages (10 and 15) compared with those embryos from an early passage (passage 5).

Other groups working on transgenic animal research welcomed the report but questioned how much was new.

Dr Harry Griffin, assistant director at the Roslin Institute, near Edinburgh, which published a report on the birth of the cloned sheep Dolly in 1997, pointed out that the Roslin group had published work in 1996 reporting the production of clones from embryo derived cells kept in vitro for 13 passages. □

(AP PHOTO/HO)

Four calves, cloned from cells cultured for several months, show that relatively "old" cells can be used for cloning

UK GPs will have to show they are fit to practise

Linda Beecham *BMJ*

GPs' leaders in the United Kingdom have published criteria that will help the profession and patients to identify both excellent and unacceptable family doctors.

Based on guidance from the General Medical Council, *Good Medical Practice for General Practitioners* and another consultation document, *Revalidation for Clinical General Practice*, are responses to the GMC's decision that doctors in all disciplines must show on a regular basis that they are fit to practise.

According to the criteria, drawn up by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), the BMA's General Practitioners Committee (GPC), and other organisations of GPs, together with lay input, an excellent GP is one who:

- Keeps up to date and participates in clinical audit;
- Has a satisfactory complaints procedure;
- Possesses appropriate diagnostic and treatment equipment;
- Keeps records up to date and colleagues informed;
- Provides satisfactory access to patients;
- Is able to work in a team; and
- Uses resources effectively.

Unacceptable doctors may have telephone lines that are frequently engaged; do not respect confidentiality or listen to patients' concerns; may have restricted opening hours; may stock out of date drugs; and may assume that patients consent to treatment without asking.

Although most GPs will satisfy the criteria for revalidation, some will not, and they will have to be visited and assessed. The few GPs who are not considered acceptable for revalidation will be offered an assessment and remedial support.

Any GP who does not respond to remedial support will be reported to the GMC, which may invoke its fitness to practise procedures.

The RCGP and the GPC envisage revalidation as a continuing process and recommend that GPs should collect information on their performance between submissions to remain on the register.

The final structures will depend on the GMC's decisions and resources, but the GPs' representatives envisage a combination of methods such as self assessment and peer review. □

Good Medical Practice for General Practitioners and *Revalidation for Clinical General Practice* are on the Royal College of General Practitioner's website (www.rcgp.org.uk).