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WMA agrees to refine changes to Declaration of Helsinki

Disagreement among doctors about the ethics of placebo controlled trials has led the World Medical Association to set up a working group to investigate the issue.

At its meeting in France last week, Dr Delon Human, the association's secretary general, admitted that there had been disagreement over the issue.

Last year the association declared, in revising the Declaration of Helsinki, that any treatment being tested in clinical trials should be compared with the best universal standard rather than with a placebo (*BMJ* 2000;321:913). In an attempt to stop the exploitation of people in poorer populations by pharmaceutical companies and research organisations, it said that a placebo could be used only when no standard treatment was available.

The ruling has led to some trials being discontinued, and, in some places, it has been ignored. Dr Human admitted that the change could have been in contravention of some countries' ethical guidelines.

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

Nurse-led pilot schemes succeed despite obstacles

Nurse-led pilot schemes have achieved a great deal despite hostility from doctors and many bureaucratic obstacles, a report from the King's Fund, an independent health care charity in London, has concluded.

In 1998 nine nurse-led sites were launched in England as part of the first wave of personal medical services pilots. The nine pilots were designed to maximise the use of nursing skills and to allow nurses to exercise leadership within the primary care team. Many of the pilots aimed to serve vulnerable populations often poorly served by general practice, such as refugees or homeless people.

The report said that the new model of care has created some local controversy and, in particular, hostility from doctors. Most opposition from doctors occurred when nurses tried to offer services to the mainstream population rather than to disadvantaged groups.

Jacqui Wise *London*

The report is available from the King's Fund bookshop (tel 020 7307 2591), price £5.99.

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Dutch GPs take three day strike action

In the Netherlands 7000 GPs went on strike last week for three days—the first such action in their history.

They claim that insufficient government investment in general practice is threatening the quality of their care. An estimated 90% of GPs responded to the strike call from the Dutch Association of General Practitioners (Landelijke Huisartsen Vereniging), after a meeting of representatives voted 725 to 5 for the strike, with 11 abstentions.

Routine operations were cancelled as patients needing to see a doctor arrived at hospital accident and emergency departments or attended special emergency points set up by GPs.

The strike is the culmination of months of unrest among GPs, which included a month of actions in February. The spark last week was the cabinet's spring budget, which the Dutch Association of General Practitioners argued did not solve the problem of sharply rising general practice costs.

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

Indian health officials probe use of "unapproved" treatment

Indian health officials are investigating the circumstances in which private doctors injected an experimental treatment agent into patients with coronary disease, although India had not approved the product for either treatment or trials.

Doctors at the Metro Hospital and Research Centre in a New Delhi suburb injected vascular endothelial growth factor into at least 16 patients with advanced coronary artery disease between early 1998 and mid-2000.

Medical teams in the United States pioneered the use of growth factors to stimulate the formation of new blood vessels in the late 1990s, and its use in India was defended by the doctor involved on the grounds that no alternative treatment was available for the patients involved.

Dr Purshotam Lal, director of interventional cardiology at the Metro Hospital, said: "We used it selectively on patients with diffused coronary artery disease or chronic total occlusion who were not treatable with standard procedures like angioplasty or coronary bypass."

Ganapati Mudur *New Delhi*

US lawmakers pass bill on violence to fetus

The US House of Representatives last month passed a bill, by a vote of 252 to 172, that, if approved by the Senate, would give a new legal status to the fetus. It establishes criminal penalties for harming a fetus during the commission of a federal offence against a pregnant woman.

Republican Representative Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who introduced the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, wrote: "Under the bill, criminals who commit an already defined federal crime of violence (bombing, car jacking, etc) against a pregnant woman can be charged with a second offence on behalf of the second victim, the unborn child."

A message from the White House said that the administration supported the protection of unborn children and therefore supported the passage of the bill.

Supporters of the bill called it an antiviolence measure designed to ensure that criminals who attacked a pregnant woman were charged with murder or manslaughter if the woman survived but her "unborn child" died.

Its opponents claimed, however, that the legislation was a thinly disguised effort to undermine abortion rights by granting a new legal status to a fetus.

Fred Charatan *Florida*

Bush's policy on abortion abroad overturned

The International Relations Committee of the US House of Representatives handed the Bush administration a defeat last week when it voted by 26 to 22 to overturn his executive order denying federal funds to over-