

IN BRIEF

Fall in autopsies may adversely affect monitoring of medical outcomes:

Autopsy rates in the United States have fallen since the 1940s from 50% of bodies to less than 8% today, and healthcare financing reforms may be implicated, say researchers (*Social Science and Medicine* 2009 Oct 21, doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.09.018). "Our results imply that these reforms may inadvertently reduce the incentive to monitor medical outcomes," they say.

US uses more intensive care beds than UK: US patients in hospital who die are almost five times more likely to have spent time in the intensive care unit than their UK counterparts, a study has found (*American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine* 2009;180:875-80). The researchers at Columbia University attributed the greater use of intensive care beds to there being six times more in the United States.

Researchers recommend checking drugs of women planning pregnancy:

Doctors should conduct a drug inventory in women planning a pregnancy, say the authors of a study into prescriptions filled during pregnancy for drugs harmful to the developing fetus (*BJOG* 2009 Oct 13, doi:10.1111/j.1471-0528.2009.02377). Of 109 344 women, 56% filled at least one prescription for a drug during pregnancy; 6.3% filled at least one prescription for a drug known to pose a risk to the fetus.

New consumer health portal: Boots UK has teamed up with US based WebMD, the world's largest online health information service, to launch a new health portal for the United Kingdom. The service offers consumers an online symptom checker which gives a list of useful questions to ask GPs. The new portal uses expertise from the BMJ Evidence Centre.

Cloning pioneer scientist convicted:

A district court in South Korea has convicted the cloning scientist Professor Hwang Woo-suk of embezzling funds during his stem cell research. Professor Hwang, aged 56, was given a two year sentence suspended for three years after the court decided that he had illegally diverted money from research funding. The scientist was at the centre of a scandal in 2006 when his employers, Seoul National University, found that he had falsified the results of research that he had published in *Science* (*BMJ* 2006;332:138).

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China's hepatitis B prevention plan will be cost effective

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A country-wide catch-up hepatitis B vaccination programme in China would save thousands of lives and be cost effective, research from Stanford University has shown (*Hepatology* 2009 Sep 9, doi:10.1002/hep.23310).

Vaccinating the estimated 150 million children aged 1-19 years who are currently unprotected will cost an estimated \$423m (£260m; €281m) but will save the economy \$840m, by preventing eight million infections and 65 000 deaths, the researchers found.

Routine free vaccination of babies against the disease began only in 2002, and serological survey data show that 40% of children between 5 and 19 years remain unprotected, said Samuel So, professor of surgery and the Lui Hac Minh professor at Stanford and one of the study's authors.

"In China, 50% to 60% of the population under the age of 19 have already either become chronically infected or have cleared the infection," said Dr So. "The only way to really ensure that 95% of the population is covered is to vaccinate within 12-24 hours of birth and complete two more shots, but the challenge is that not all babies are born in hospitals, and 20% of newborns are not getting the birth dose on time."

Hepatitis B infects about 60% of China's population, and 9.8% of the population is chronically infected with the disease. There are an estimated 263 000 hepatitis B related deaths as a result of liver cirrhosis and cancer in the country, and liver cancer accounts for 4% of the country's total mortality, second only to stomach cancer as one of the leading cancer related causes of death, show data from the World Health Organization.

The paper provides evidence that supports a decision earlier this year to begin



20% of newborn babies in China are still not receiving the hepatitis B dose in time

to launch a hepatitis B vaccination catch-up programme as part of China's ongoing health system reforms. In June the Ministry of Health announced that a catch-up programme covering 23.2 million people would be implemented over the next three years to cover people born between 1994 and 2001 who are not yet vaccinated, China's official news agency, Xinhua, said.

"A decision has been taken at the highest level to implement the catch-up programme, and [the time frame allows] provinces to do it at a pace that works for them," said Yvan Hutin, hepatitis officer at the World Health Organization's China office in Beijing.

Once vaccination catch-up is achieved, education is a priority, he said, because transmission modes of the disease are not well understood in China.

Dr Hutin added, "The next step is to promote education, for the general population about the importance of hepatitis B vaccination, as well as for healthcare workers on what they should do to protect themselves from hepatitis B."

See editorial on bmj.com, doi:10.1136/bmj.b4431

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Data from Thai HIV vaccine study

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Disclosure of the full data from the trial of an HIV vaccine in Thailand shows that although there was a trend towards the prevention of HIV among vaccine recipients this did not reach statistical significance.



The study sparked controversy in September when the authors released incomplete trial results, in which one type of analysis showed the vaccine reduced infection rate by a third (*BMJ* 2009;339:b3963). Critics said that they should have waited until complete data were available for release.

The additional data were presented at the AIDS Vaccine 2009 conference in Paris on 20 October and simultaneously published in