

*In brief*

**FDA demands warning label on rofecoxib:** The US Food and Drug Administration has ordered drug manufacturer Merck to put a warning label on the cyclo-oxygenase-2 (COX-2) inhibitor rofecoxib (Vioxx) stating that it can raise blood pressure and may increase the risk of heart attacks; the move follows research findings on the drug's side effects (*BMJ* 2001;323:471).

**Physicians for Human Rights-Israel win human rights award:** Dr Ruchama Marton and Mr Salah Haj-Yehya, the president and fieldwork director respectively of the Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, have been chosen for the Jonathan Mann award for global health and human rights for having campaigned for free passage of Palestinian medical goods, patients, and medical staff to and from medical centres in the occupied territories.

**US court upholds assisted suicide law:** Federal District Court judge Robert Jones has upheld Oregon's assisted suicide law, clearing the way for other states to pass similar laws. Oregon passed the United States's only Assisted Suicide Act in 1994, and it was reaffirmed by voters in 1997, when it went into effect. Since then, 91 mentally competent, terminally ill patients have taken advantage of its provisions.

**Canadian medical students run up big debts:** Canadian medical students are running up huge and unprecedented debts because of high medical school fees that average nearly \$C13 000 (£5700; \$8275; €9280) annually and soon will triple in British Columbia.

**Reduce violence and conflict by reducing society's inequalities:** Inequalities in society are one of the major causes of civil disturbance and conflict, according to a recent conference organised by the campaigning global health charity Medact. Doctors should aim to prevent the growth of inequalities to reduce the threat of violence and conflict, it said. More information is available at: [www.medact.org](http://www.medact.org)

## GPs get a new contract "to transform their lives"

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

GPs are being offered a brand new contract that promises to transform their working lives and end the disillusionment that has pervaded the profession for the past decade, hampering recruitment and driving many doctors out of general practice.

For the first time—if the proposals are accepted—GPs throughout the United Kingdom will be contracted to their practice or primary care trust rather than to the NHS and will have the option of drawing a salary rather than operating as independent contractors. They will also stop having 24 hour responsibility for their patients as out of hours care passes to their local primary care organisation.

GPs will also be encouraged to hand over about a third of their duties, such as managing chronically ill patients and those with minor ailments, to nurses and pharmacists. Dr Simon Fradd, joint deputy chairman of the General Practitioners Committee, which has negotiated the proposed contract with the NHS Confederation, called this a chance "to empower other healthcare workers and to maximise the use of their skills in patient care."



Prime Minister Tony Blair addresses a conference on improving working lives for doctors organised by the Department of Health and *BMJ careers*, the day before the new GP contract was announced

In the proposed contract the standard working week for a GP will be Monday to Friday from 8 am to 6.30 pm. If it is agreed, GPs will be able to choose the level of service they wish to provide, with the resources provided, and with financial rewards for achieving their own targets and continuing to improve the quality of the service they provide. All practices will provide essential services, including seeing patients who are ill and managing terminally ill patients.

Other services, such as cervical cytology, contraception services, and immunisation, need not be provided by every practice in a primary care organisation.

"I think that this contract has the potential to make a substantial difference to the quality of life of doctors and to the quality

of care for patients. It will give GPs hope—a light at the end of the tunnel—revitalise general practice, and re-enthuse GPs," said Dr John Chisholm, chairman of the General Practitioners Committee, at a press briefing to launch the new document.

Although payments behind the new deal have not yet been finalised with the government, Dr Chisholm implied that GPs' earnings potential would increase considerably and added that GPs had the right to a balance between their professional and private life just like other workers. For the past decade this has been "out of kilter for GPs" he said, and was largely to blame for the shortage of GPs.

In the past year only 18 new doctors had been recruited into general practice. □

## Male circumcision linked to lower rates of cervical cancer

Fred Charatan *Florida*

A research team from the Multi-center Cervical Cancer Study Group of the International Agency for Research on Cancer has found that the risk of cervical cancer is less in women whose male partners are circumcised. The study also found that circumcised men have a reduced risk of contracting penile human papillomavirus infection.

The researchers, headed by Dr Xavier Castellsague of the Llobregat Hospital in Barcelona, Spain, pooled data on 1913

couples enrolled in one of seven case-control studies of cervical carcinoma *in situ* and cervical cancer in five countries—Spain, Brazil, Thailand, Colombia, and the Philippines. In 977 of the couples the woman had cervical cancer.

Of the 1913 men in the whole study, 1543 were not circumcised (81%). A total of 1215 men had had six or more partners, rendering them more likely to have contracted human papillomavirus infection. In those cou-

ples where the man had had six or more partners, the woman's risk of cervical cancer was more than double if the man was not circumcised. The findings may not apply to couples in which the man has had fewer than six sex partners, because he is then less likely to be carrying the virus.

The researchers used a polymerase chain reaction assay to detect the presence of penile human papillomavirus DNA in 1520 of the men, 1139 (75%) of whom were found to have the virus. The virus was detected in 166 of the 847 uncircumcised men (20%) and in 16 of the 292 circumcised men (6%) (*New England Journal of Medicine* 2002;346:1105-12). □