

*In brief*

**UK agrees new drug pricing scheme:** The United Kingdom last week agreed new terms for the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme—a voluntary system setting out the profit that manufacturers can earn on the sale of brand name products to the NHS. The terms of the scheme agreed a price reduction of 4.5% on branded medicines and a ban on price increases until January 2001, but they will grant greater allowances for research and development (up to 23%—from 20%—of sales to the NHS).

**Nevirapine cuts vertical HIV transmission:** Research in Uganda and the United States has shown that two doses of nevirapine, a relatively affordable antiretroviral drug, can significantly reduce the rate of HIV transmission from mothers to their babies. Giving a single dose of nevirapine to women during labour and to their babies during the first few days of life gave an infection rate of 13% when the babies were 4 months old, compared with a rate of 25% in a comparable group given zidovudine.

**Clinical director for NICE:** Professor Peter Littlejohns, professor of public health at St George's Hospital Medical School in London, has been appointed clinical director of the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE)—a special health authority set up earlier this year in England to develop guidance on clinical and cost effectiveness of treatment strategies.

**Excess workload for UK surgeons:** A survey by the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland has shown that 71% of consultant general surgeons are working up to twice the recommended core hours. The majority of surgeons are contracted to work 10 “notional half days” a week—totalling 35 hours—with one additional half day for on-call work. However, 70.7% reported working 48 hours a week, and 24.3% were working up to 60 hours a week.

News *extra*   
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## More mentally ill people reported in US prisons

César Chelala *New York*

A growing number of people with mental illness are being held in US prisons, according to a recent report by the US Department of Justice.

The report is the first in-depth national study of mental illness in US prisons. It reported a total of 283 800 prison inmates with some form of mental illness in mid-1998, which is about 16% of the total prison population. This figure was in line with a previous literature review, suggesting that 6-15% of people in city and county jails, and 10-15% of inmates in state prisons, had severe mental illness.

The report suggested that one of the main reasons for the increasing number of mentally ill people in all US prisons was the wave of discharges from long stay hospitals that started in the United States in the 1960s. The number of people in state psychiatric hospitals decreased from 559 000 in 1955 (out of a

population of 165 million) to 72 000 by 1998 (out of a total national population of around 250 million). At the same time, the number of prison beds has increased four times in the past 25 years, raising the number of prisoners to 1.8 million.

The Department of Justice study found that mentally ill people in state prisons were twice as likely to have been homeless before their arrest as

other prisoners and twice as likely to have been physically or sexually abused in childhood. In addition, it found that mentally ill inmates were far more likely than others to be regular users of alcohol and drugs.

The study has been criticised because it relied on answers given by prison inmates themselves, who were asked whether they had any mental illness or had ever received treatment for this type of condition. □

*Mental Health and Treatment of Inmates and Probationers* is available on the internet at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/).



Mentally ill people form 16% of the US prison population

## UK proposes new approach to personality disorders

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Proposals for new powers to lock up dangerous people with severe personality disorders who have committed no offence were outlined by the British government this week.

Ministers are considering two options in England and Wales: strengthening current powers to detain people who pose a risk in either prison or hospital, or creating a new specialist service to house those with severe antisocial personality disorders. Although those who commit serious crimes can be detained under the current law, civil detention or “sectioning” under the Mental Health Act is allowed only for the treatment of mental illness. Psychiatrists consider that most people with severe personality disorders are not treatable.

Government ministers estimated that the gap in the legislation currently leaves 300 to 600 untreatable dangerous adults with severe personality disorders in the community. The first option, suggested in a consultation paper produced jointly by the Department of Health and the Home Office, would include widening the use of discretionary life sentences for those convicted of a criminal offence and abolishing the “treatability” requirement for civil proceedings. There would also be new powers to supervise people with psychopathic disorders released from hospital and recall them to detention.

The second option would involve creating a new indeterminate order usable in civil or criminal proceedings for people judged to be a danger, and creating new institutions to house them. Those subject to the new order would have their detention regularly reviewed and it would be subject to appeal, but they would be detained until they were considered not to present a serious risk. After release they would be subject to recall for assess-

ment. The home secretary, Jack Straw, said: “There is a very small group of very dangerous people who currently fall outside both the law and mental health provisions. We need to change this wholly unacceptable position and move beyond the rather artificial criterion of ‘treatability’ in determining who should be detained.”

Nigel Eastman, a forensic psychiatrist and chairman of the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ law committee, said that it was surprising that the government had produced the proposals now when the first draft of a review of the mental health law by a panel headed by Professor Geneva Richardson had recommended that the treatability test should be strengthened rather than abolished. □

*Managing Dangerous People with Severe Personality Disorder: Proposals for Policy Development* is available from the Department of Health, PO Box 777, London SE1 6XH or on the websites of the Department of Health ([www.doh.gov.uk](http://www.doh.gov.uk)) and the Home Office ([www.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk)).