

## News @ a glance

**Dalhousie goes smoke-free:** This month, Dalhousie University in Halifax became the first in Canada to ban smoking on its property, but 6 other universities are already showing interest in the program. "We don't want to persecute people who smoke," says William Louch, director of environmental health and safety at Dalhousie, who notes that smokers can still move to public property, such as sidewalks, to light up. "We are controlling what we can." Dalhousie's decision follows a survey last winter in which 82% of respondents said they supported a ban. Dalhousie introduced a scent-free policy in 1998 that has been "hugely successful," Louch told *CMAJ*. The smoking ban was launched with an educational campaign, and smoking-cessation programs are being offered.

**\$1 billion for disease fight:** The president of the European Commission says he will fight for a \$1-billion contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria for 2004. "History will judge us harshly if we do not use our power to reduce poverty ... and avert the threat of death hanging over mankind," said President Romano Prodi. "I am guarantor for the one billion." Thus far, the 15 member states of the EC have committed 460 million Euros to the fund, accounting for 55% of its total. French President Jacques Chirac wants Europe and the US to contribute \$1 billion each annually. Since the fund was founded in January 2002, \$1.5 billion has been approved for 150 programs in 92 countries.

**Federal rule targets BSE:** As a result of last spring's case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in an Alberta cow, the federal government has prohibited human consumption of "specified risk materials," including the brain and spinal cord. In BSE-infected cattle, the abnormal prion proteins concentrate in tissues such as the brain, and there may be a link between the consumption of these tissues



from infected cattle and the incidence of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), the human equivalent of BSE. The ban on using these body parts for human consumption took effect Aug. 23.

**NHL concussion rate plateaus:** The reported concussion rate among National Hockey League athletes over the last 5 years is triple that of the previous decade but has now plateaued, a new study indicates (*Can J Neurol Sci* 2003; 30:206-9). In 1986/87, 4 concussions were reported per 1000 games; by 2000, there were 30. Initially the researchers thought bigger, faster players, new equipment and harder boards were responsible for the increase. But the rapid rise and subsequent settling at the higher rate suggest that "increased medical recognition of concussion and increased reporting are responsible for much of the apparent increase," states neurologist Richard Wennberg of the Toronto Western Hospital. The increase in reported concussions began in 1997, about the same time the NHL started a program to lessen the danger. "Neurologists, trainers and players are more aware now of the concussion problem than they were even 10 years ago," says coauthor Dr. Charles Tator. The authors gleaned their data from weekly injury reports in the *Hockey News*.



**Meningitis risk for cochlear implant recipients:** A new study shows that children with cochlear implants are at a much greater risk of bacterial meningitis than other children (*N Engl J Med* 2003;349:435-45). Researchers followed 4264 children in the US between Jan. 1, 1997, and Aug. 6, 2002, and found that 26 had developed bacterial meningitis caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. The incidence was 138.2 cases per 100 000 person years, more than 30 times higher than among children in the general population. The risk was greatest in children whose implants included a Silastic wedge positioner, which the manufac-

turers recalled in July 2002. There was also an increased risk among children with inner-ear malformations or cerebrospinal fluid leaks. A commentary in *NEJM* and in *CMAJ* (2002;167:670) called for appropriate vaccination for anyone using these implants.

**US bill up in smoke:** A surprisingly strong bid to allow medicinal marijuana use in California and 9 other US states was defeated by the US House of Representatives, 273 to 152. A similar bid in 1998 was defeated by 311 to 94. The 10 states allow medicinal use of marijuana, but federal prosecutors are still charging people for such use. Representatives from these states wanted to shield these smokers from federal prosecution.

**SARS claims first North American doctor:** Toronto FP Nestor Yanga died Aug. 13 after battling SARS since April. Yanga, 54, contracted SARS in the first few weeks of the outbreak after treating a patient who had the illness. He was placed in intensive care Apr. 8 and remained on a respirator during most of his stay. Yanga, past-president of the Filipino Canadian Medical Association, is survived by his wife and 2 sons. His death was the 44th related to SARS in the Toronto area, and he was the first physician in North America to succumb. Two Toronto nurses, Tecla Lin and Nelia Laroza also died.

**Triple HIV-treatment warning:** Glaxo-SmithKline is warning health care providers about a high rate of early virologic non-response in a clinical trial of therapy-naïve adults receiving once-daily combination therapy with lamivudine (Epivir), abacavir (Ziagen) and tenofovir (Viread). The company reported poor efficacy in patients receiving the triple-treatment and terminated that arm of its clinical trial. It also says that abacavir and lamivudine should not be used in combination with tenofovir as a triple antiretroviral therapy in naïve patients or those already receiving treatment. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*