

News @ a glance

OxyContin task force: Newfoundland and Labrador has set up a task force to investigate prescription drug abuse, particularly involving the controversial painkiller oxycodone (OxyContin). "We are very concerned that this province is experiencing a rise in abuse of OxyContin, far beyond that of other provinces," says health minister Elizabeth Marshall. Although there are no definitive numbers, the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary reports at least 6 deaths last year related to the use of the drug. The Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association asked the government to set up an electronic system linking physician offices and pharmacies to eliminate double doctoring. "It would provide real-time access, so that a physician could check a patient's prescription history while the patient sits in the doctor's office," notes NLMA President Dr. Susan King. — *Donalee Moulton*, Halifax

Not all drugs work: A senior drug executive has made the rather surprising admission that most drugs do not work in all patients. Allen Roses of Glaxo-SmithKline was quoted in a UK national newspaper as saying that more than 90% of drugs work only in 30%–50% of patients. However, Roses is hopeful that developments in gene technology will enable identification of patients who are most likely to respond to a particular drug. Having identified non-responders, it may be possible to target new candidate molecules specifically at those patients who have failed to respond to existing pharmaceuticals. Elimination of potential non-responders should allow smaller and faster drug trials. — *Cathel Kerr*, Fife, Scotland

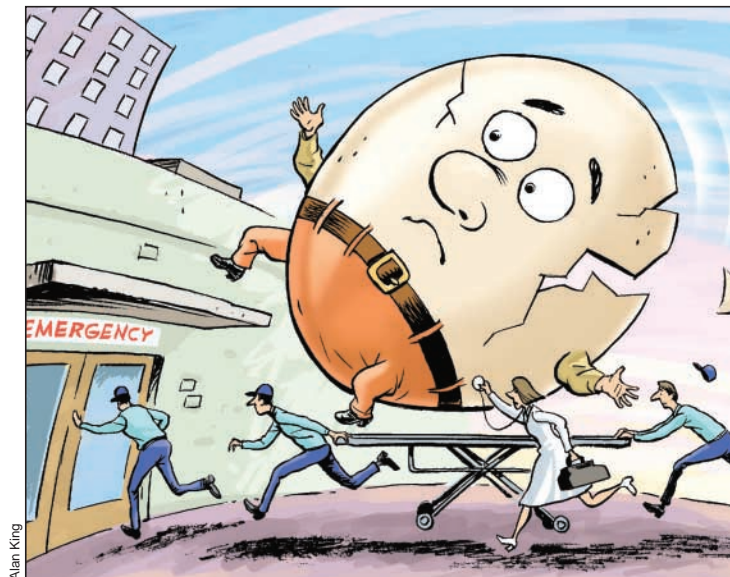
Best in Web: An Ottawa-based fibromyalgia Web site (<http://fibromyalgia.ncf.ca>) was presented as the world's second

best health site at the American College of Rheumatology's 2003 Annual Scientific Meeting. Physicians from Rush-Presbyterian–St. Luke's Medical Center in Chicago, Ill., selected the 20 top health Web sites out of 900 000 world wide, then evaluated them for accuracy, information quality, user-friendliness, and usefulness. The Ottawa site's founder is Sheila Alder. — *Colette van Haaren*, Ottawa

A life well lived: Anesthetists mourned the passing of one of their foremost colleagues last year: Dr. Pierre Limoges. The former president of the Canadian Anesthesiologists' Society (1995), Limoges contributed to numerous committees and boards at the Royal College and his workplace during his 30-year career. At Sainte-Justine Hospital he was chief of anesthesiology from 1992–97. He died in Montreal last March at the age of 58.

Humpty survives cracks: A tongue-in-cheek look at the alarming number of head injuries incurred by nursery rhyme characters (*CMAJ* 2003;169[12]:1294-6) attracted national media attention and the largest ever number of visits in 1 month to an online article (27 137 hits in December). But some of the 30 or so eletter writers claim it left the *CMAJ* with egg on its face. “Doctors like this [authors Dr. Sarah Shea and Sara Giles] make a stressful situation worse because the parents are more confused when they leave the [office],” wrote one. “Get real!!” opined another. Some writers said they found the letters funnier than the article.

Go North: The University of Northern British Columbia is expanding its residency program to include anesthesiology, ophthalmology, plastic surgery, and ear, nose and throat surgery at Prince George Regional Hospital. The hospital’s program director, Dr. Galt Wilson, also hopes to increase the number of obstetrics and gynecology spaces by Sep-



tember. Since the family practice residency program began in 1995, 19 of its 47 graduates have stayed in Northern BC — virtually the only Canadian-born doctors in the area, says Wilson. — *Heather Kent, Vancouver*

More US med students: After a 6-year decline, applications to US medical schools increased by 3.4% this school year. In all,

34 785 students applied to attend medical school. The Association of American Medical Colleges attributes the increase to a rise in the number of college-age students, and a lagging economy, which often prompts people to return to school. For the first time ever, there were also more female applicants (17 800, or 50.8%). — Compiled by *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*