

News @ a glance

My choice: The Canadian Tobacco Manufacturer's Council is paying \$2.5 million to fund a new online association for adult Canadian smokers. Launched in late September, *mychoice.ca* is designed to give Canada's 5 million smokers a voice equal to the that of the anti-smoking lobby. Within 3 weeks, 5000 members had signed up. "This shows there is a real demand for information that looks at the issues from all sides — not just the politically correct viewpoint," said *mychoice.ca* president Nancy Daigneault. The Canadian Cancer Society says the tobacco industry is funding *mychoice.ca* and the Fair Air Association of Canada partly in response to the Ontario Liberal government's pledge to introduce a province-wide smoking ban this fall.

"This is one tactic in their overall lobbying strategy that clearly they believe will slow the progress of the adoption of legislation," says spokesperson Rob Cunningham. Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada is concerned. "Already the tobacco companies spend more on promoting their products than governments spend in anti-smoking

campaigns," says executive director Dr. Cynthia Callard. — *Pauline Comeau, Ottawa*

Heroin trial: North America's first clinical trial to determine whether prescribed heroin stabilizes the amount addicts take will begin in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in December, followed by Montréal this winter and Toronto later in 2005. The 2-year, North American Opiate Injection Trial (NAOIT) involving 470 addicts at the 3 locations has been de-

layed by City of Vancouver and Health Canada regulatory requirements and by the need to find and renovate a location in the Downtown Eastside. In the Vancouver study, 88 subjects will receive heroin and 70 will take methadone. The trials will also assess whether prescribed heroin will improve addicts' health and quality of life, says Jim Boothroyd, the project's communications manager. Counselling will be available to participants. There are about 5000 heroin addicts in the Downtown Eastside. — *Heather Kent, Vancouver*

Exam stolen: The first of 2 qualifying examinations offered by the Medical Council of Canada (MCC) is being revised after a computer audit revealed a security breach and probable theft of examination questions in mid-October. MCC Executive Director Dale Dauphinee would not provide details of the security breach, but said: "During an IT audit we saw something that surprised us. Let's just say that we have reason to believe that this was not an accident." He said the revised examination will be ready for the scheduled exams in November. The MCC has hired the former commissioner of the RCMP to conduct an investigation.

Alberta infant mortality high:

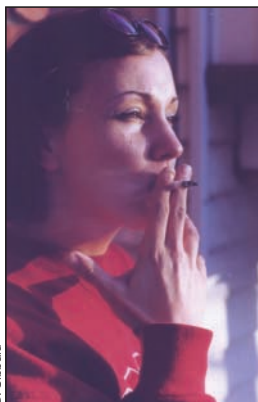
Albertans suffer the highest infant mortality rate in the country, according to Statistics Canada. Alberta had 7.3 deaths per 1000 live births in 2002, compared with the national average of 5.4. Dr. John Van Aerde, regional director for neonatology for northern and central Alberta, says the number may be skewed by women from Saskatchewan and Manitoba who come to Alberta for high-risk births. Alberta is also



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experiencing high rates of spontaneous and fertility-assisted multiple pregnancies, which produce small, often premature babies. Add a large First Nations population that experiences higher rates of alcohol and tobacco use — and you have a cocktail of potential factors impacting neonatal health, says Van Aerde. Alberta Health and Wellness spends \$7 million annually on early childhood programs and perinatal care and recently launched a perinatal health program. — *Lisa Grengoire, Edmonton*

Body counts: In the 17.8 months after the US-led invasion of Iraq, 100 000 Iraqis died, according to a survey of Iraqi households. The survey, published online by *The Lancet* on Oct. 29, was led by epidemiologist Les Roberts of Johns Hopkins' Center for International Emergency Disaster and Refugee Studies. Roberts and his team of 7 Iraqis risked their lives going door-to-door in September to 33 clusters of 30 households each across the country. The risk of death from violence — Iraq's major public health problem — was 58 times higher after the invasion than in the 14.6 months before it, the researchers said. Most of those killed by coalition forces were women and children. The article quotes General Tommy Franks, retired commander of US and allied forces, as saying "we don't do body counts." — Compiled by *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



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