

News @ a glance

Schiavo ruling: An extraordinary intervention in a family fight over whether to remove a comatose woman's feeding tube saw the US Congress pass a law requiring a Federal Court judge to hear the case. Despite rulings by 19 Florida judges in lower courts, and the Supreme Court's refusal to hear an appeal, Congress convened a special Palm Sunday session and interrupted a recess to pass the bill. President George W. Bush rushed back from his ranch in Texas to sign the legislation. The new law allowed Terri Schiavo's parents to ask a Federal Court judge to reinsert the feeding tube that Schiavo's husband Michael had removed 3 days earlier. The judge ruled against Schiavo's parents, and she died Mar. 31. She had been in a coma for 15 years, following brain damage after a heart attack. "In cases like this one, where there are serious questions and substantial doubts, our society, our laws, and our courts should have a presumption in favor of life," Bush said in a statement. Groups representing the Christian Right joined Schiavo's parents in lobbying politicians to keep her alive. — *Laura Eggertson, CMAJ*

Sunbed risks: Sunbed use increases the risk of skin cancer, particularly among people under 18, warns the WHO. Studies have shown that young people who get sunburns have an increased risk of developing melanoma later in life. More recently, a link has been found between the use of sunbeds and cancer (*J Nat Cancer Inst* 2003;95:1530-8). Each year,

there are 132 000 cases of malignant melanoma and over 2 million cases of other skin cancers worldwide. WHO warns that these rates are increasing and advises regulatory authorities to adopt stricter controls on the use of sunbeds. One in 3 cancers worldwide is skin-related; in the US the rate is 1 in 2. Health Canada's recently revised guidelines for tanning equipment prohibit their use by children under 16 and recommend new warning labels (see image below). France and California have prohibited people under age 18 from using sunbeds.

Applying pressure: Millions of Canadians who use home blood pressure monitoring devices may be endangering their health if they are not properly instructed in how to read the machines. Dr. Thomas Wilson, a researcher with the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation, estimates that these machines are used by a third of urban Canadians with high blood pressure. In his study (www.heartandstroke.ca), only about half of the 80 participants were able to measure their blood pressure within 5 mm of mercury. Only 7 people had been instructed in the monitors' use at the time of purchase. The study looked at several parameters to do with measurement, such as whether or not subjects knew they should rest for 2 minutes minimum before taking their blood pressure (90% didn't know). — *Tim Lougheed, Ottawa*

Breast best: Healthy, full-term babies should receive only breast



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milk for the first 6 months, advises the Canadian Paediatric Society. Previously, the CPS had endorsed a range of 4 to 6 months. "There is evidence that the benefits increase with longer breastfeeding, particularly when the infant is exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months, stated Dr. Margaret Boland, chair of the CPS Nutrition Committee. Statistics Canada reports that 85% of mothers start breastfeeding, but only 19% do so exclusively for 6 months. The new CPS recommendations are consistent with those of the WHO.

Alternative choice: Alternative medicines are increasing in popularity among Canadians, indicate new data from Statistics Canada. The latest figures from the Canadian Community Health Survey show that 20% of Canadians over age 12 — some 5.4 million people — used alternative health care services in 2003; up from 15% in 1994-95. The rate was higher among women (23%) than men (17%). About 11% of the 12-and-over population had consulted a chiropractor (the most common form of alternative care), 8% a massage therapist, 2% an acupuncturist and 2% a homeopath or naturopath. Use rose with income, likely due to the fact that many types of alternative care are not publicly funded. Twenty-six percent of individuals in the highest household income group used alternative care in 2003, compared to 13% of those in the lowest income group. — Compiled by *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

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Danger



Ultraviolet Radiation

Overexposure causes skin and eye burns.
Use protective eyewear. Follow instructions.
Drugs and cosmetics may increase UV effects.
UV exposure can be hazardous to your health and
in the long term can contribute to premature ageing
and skin cancer. UV effects are cumulative.
Greater risks are associated with early and repeated exposure.

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