News @ a glance

New specialties: The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada is now examining 7 new specialties as potential candidates for certification. The 7 are child and adolescent psychiatry, forensic psychiatry, geriatric psychiatry, psychomatic medicine (comorbid general medical and psychiatric illnesses), general internal medicine, pain medicine, as well as sports and exercise medicine. College spokesperson Karen McCarthy says the process for certification can take up to 2 years or more.

Self-sacrifice: The Church of England has declared that donating body parts for transplantation is an act of mercy and “part of the self-sacrifice that God requires for us. ... Giving oneself and one’s possessions voluntarily for the well being of others and without compulsion is a Christian duty.” The church took the stance in conjunction with consultations being held on whether or not the European Union should adopt uniform policies on organ donation.

Acupuncture coverage: British Columbia has become the first Canadian province to include acupuncture treatments as a supplementary health benefit of its medical services plan, announcing that residents with a combined family income under \$28 000 will be eligible to receive \$23 per visit for a maximum 10 visits per year.

Diana Lundin / iStockphoto

New York bound: The hunt for an HIV vaccine got a shot in the arm last month when former Canadian Institutes of Health Research president Alan Bernstein was named the first executive director of the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise, an alliance of independent organizations that has attracted US\$750 million for its scientific plan to hasten the discovery and development of an effective vaccine. Bernstein, who will be based in the enterprise’s newly-minted secretariat in New York City, unexpectedly announced last summer (*CMAJ* 2007;177[3]:241) that he was resigning from the granting council after 7 years at the helm.

Maternal mortality: There’s little chance that Millennium Development Goal 5 — to reduce the number of women who die in pregnancy and children by three-quarters by 2015 — can be achieved as the world’s maternal mortality ratio isn’t declining by the requisite pace, the World Health Organization says. The ratio would have to decline by 5.5% annually to achieve the goal, but it’s dropping by less than 1%. In 2005, 536 000 women died of maternal causes, compared with 576 000 in 1990. Some 11 countries accounted for 65% of the deaths, led by India (117 000), Nigeria (59 000), the Democratic Republic of Congo (32 000) and Afghanistan (26 000).

First aid: Alberta will commence mental health first aid training for at least 1 teacher or staff person in each of the province’s roughly 2000 schools next year so that they can recognize symptoms of mental health problems such as depression within the student population. It’s hoped at least 1 person in each school will be trained by 2009.

Appointments: Newfoundland general surgeon Dr. William Fitzgerald has been elected the 40th president of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. Fitzgerald assumed the 2-year post in September, saying his priority will be to press for a pan-Canadian mechanism for health human resources planning, which now occurs “in silos. Provinces, territories, health professionals and the federal government each have their own models.”

Texas 2-step: Applications for licences to practise are flooding into the Texas Medical Board 4 years after the state approved a constitutional amendment limiting the size of damages in medical malpractice suits. The board has licensed 10 878 new physicians since the September 2003 limitation was introduced, up from 8391 in the prior 4 years. There’s also a backlog of 2500 applications. Texas limited the ceiling on awards for pain and suffering to US\$250 000 apiece for a maximum 2 institutions. The cap on economic losses was pegged at \$1.6 million in cases where a death occurred. Some 14 other states have since adopted similar, but less stringent, limitations. Malpractice insurance premiums have dropped 21.3% in the Lone Star state.

House of bliss: The UK Medical Research Council, Wellcome Trust, Cancer Research UK and University College, London are proposing to construct a massive new laboratory complex in central London that is capable of accommodating 1500 researchers. Billed as the largest laboratory of its kind, the £350 million British Library International Science Site would house such research facilities as the National Institute for Medical Research and the World Influenza Centre. But the proposal hinges on proponents’ success in purchasing 3.5 acres of land now being sold off by the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

Palliative care planning: The World Health Organization has issued a guide for developing palliative care services for terminally ill cancer patients. Aimed at health care planners, the guide contains formulas for mapping need against services, while outlining typical barriers to implementing national approaches, including laws or regulations that make it difficult to stockpile painkillers. The WHO projects 7.6 million out of 58 million deaths worldwide in 2005 were attributable to cancer, with 70% of those occurring in the developing world, where low-cost public health models of palliative care are checkerboard, at best. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

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