

Briefly

Patients first: Honouring appointment times, (or booking longer appointment times, adding catch-up slots or, at a minimum, offering apologies for making patients wait when meetings overrun), as well as extended opening hours are among measures that the British Medical Association recommends that general practitioners adopt to improve service to patients. In a new guidance to doctors, *Developing general practice: Listening to patients*, the association also urges that British doctors abandon their practice of closing for a half day a week. Among other recommendations: establish patient participation groups, adopt user-friendly complaint procedures, place toys for kids in waiting rooms, regularly clean waiting rooms and adopt web-based renewal of prescriptions (www.bma.org.uk/images/listenpatient_tcm41-187204.pdf).



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Traffic fatalities: The death toll on the world's roads tops 1.2 million annually, while nonfatal injuries harm between 20 and 50 million, according to the World Health Organization's *Global status report on road safety*. Almost half of those who die are pedestrians, cyclists or motorcyclists. Road traffic injuries are projected to be the fifth leading cause of death in the world by the year 2030 (http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241563840_eng.pdf).

Medication errors: Nearly 6% of general hospital admissions in Australia and up to 30.4% of admissions of the elderly are due to medication errors, some 73% of which are entirely preventable, the National Prescribing Service Ltd., an independent nonprofit organization for Quality Use of Medicines funded by the Australia government, concludes in its first comprehensive review of medication safety. Those most at risk are "older patients, those with serious health conditions, those taking multiple medications, those using high risk medicines and those being transferred between community and hospital care," states the report (www.nps.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/71675/09060902_Meds_safety_June_2009.pdf).

Safe syringes: The government's failure to provide prison needle and syringe programs in Canadian prisons "does not meet Canada's commitments to international health and human rights standards, its mandate under Canadian correctional legislation or its obligations under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms," concludes a report, *Clean Switch: The Case for Prison Needle and Syringe Programs in Canada*, commissioned by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca/publications/interfaces/downloadFile.php?ref=1496). The Conservative government has been steadfast in its opposition to sterile needle programs within prisons, including shutting down a safe tattooing pilot project (*CMAJ* 2007;176[4]:433-4 and *CMAJ* 2007;176[3]:307-8).

Life expectancies: Although trailing Japan, Italy and Switzerland, Canada still has one of the highest life expectancy rates in the world, according to the World Health Organization's latest statistics. Canadian women can expect to live 83 years, and men 78, with healthy life expectancies (the average number of years a person can expect to live in full health after factoring in years lived in less than full health because of disease or injury) of 75 and 71 years, respectively, as of 2007. *World Health*

Statistics 2009 also indicates that there has been but moderate progress toward achieving the health-related Millennium Development Goals. While there have been gains in relation to AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, there has been little progress on maternal and newborn health (www.who.int/whosis/whostat/2009/en/index.html).

Rotavirus: The World Health Organization's Strategic Advisory Group of Experts is recommending that rotavirus vaccination be included in national immunization programs. It is estimated that the virus is responsible for 500 000 diarrheal deaths annually (85% of those in developing countries in Africa and Asia) and 2 million hospitalizations of children.

Bankruptcies: More than 62% of bankruptcies in the United States in 2007 were related to medical expenses, according to an online US study (*Am J Med.* 2009; 05 Jun:DOI: 10.1016/j.amjmed.2009.04.012). Bankrupted families with private health insurance reported medical bills of US\$17 749, while those without insurance had bills of \$26 971. Hospital (48%), prescription drug (18.6%) and doctor's bills (15.1%) accounted for the bulk of their expenses.

Wellbeing index: The Institute of Wellbeing, a new independent think-tank headed by former Saskatchewan premier Roy Romanow, has announced that next year it will start publishing a comparative index that will measure the quality of Canadian life in 8 domains: "our standard of living, our health, the vitality of our communities, our education, the way we use our time, our participation in the democratic process, the state of our arts, culture and recreation and the quality of our environment." The Institute also unveiled an inaugural report covering 3 of the areas, in which it concluded that household income is the greatest predictor of health status (www.ciw.ca/Libraries/Documents/FirstReportOfTheInstituteOfWellbeing.sflb.ashx). — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

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