Briefly

Published at www.cmaj.ca from Nov. 9 to Nov. 30

Comparison shopping: Attorney General Andrew Cuomo says the state of New York will create a nationwide database and website that will allow consumers to compare how much they are likely able to be reimbursed from their health insurers in cases where they pay for health services that are out-of-network (i.e., physicians or hospitals that are not on the list of health care providers preferred by a health insurance company). The system will be established using the more than US\$100 million in settlement money that the state received from health insurers for underpaying out-of-network services. It will allow patients to compare prices before they choose their doctors, Cuomo told a press conference.

Safe use initiative: The United States Food and Drug Administration has unveiled a program to help reduce medical mishaps caused by inappropriate medication use. Under the Safe Use Initiative, the FDA proposes “to identify, using a transparent and collaborative process, specific candidate cases (e.g., drugs, drug classes, and/or therapeutic situations) that are associated with significant amounts of preventable harm,” (www.fda.gov/downloads/Drugs/DrugSafety/UCM188961.pdf).

Bottleneck precedent: A pair of foreign medical students at the University of Sydney in Australia have offered to forgo AU\$55 000 starting salaries for a year if they're given public hospital intern positions. American student Shan Siddiqi and Chinese-born student Mian Bi told *The Australian* that it's the only way they can complete their medical training (and ultimately earn permanent residence status) in light of limitations on the number of internships. Facing a doctor shortage, Australia will increase the number of medical graduates from 1632 in 2006 to

3437 in 2012 but is guaranteeing intern positions only to citizens.

Mandated choice: In an effort to reduce a severe shortage in the supply of organs available for transplant, the ethics committee of the Royal College of Physicians says the United Kingdom should examine whether to adopt “mandated choice” legislation, which would obligate all citizens to indicate whether they would donate their organs after death. All adults would be obliged to select either ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ or ‘ask my relatives’ and their responses would be recorded in a national database. A similar approach was adopted in the state of Illinois as part of the driver's licence renewal process, resulting in a 60% donation rate, as opposed to a United States average of 38%.

Work stress: Work-related mental illness, typically caused by bad managers, costs the United Kingdom roughly £15.1 billion per year, according to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. Among measures urged to alleviate stress in the workplace are flexible working hours, more positive feedback by managers, counselling services and giving employees extra days off as a reward for productivity (www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/PH22Guidance.pdf).

Recession fallout: Declining political commitment to address HIV/AIDS is leading to patients being denied anti-retroviral therapy and money being diverted to other health priorities, according to a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) report (www.msffaccess.org/fileadmin/user_upload/diseases/hiv-aids/11-05-REPORT_PunishingSuccess_A4_FINAL.pdf). “The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria Board is considering a motion to cancel the funding round (Round 10) for 2010; if accepted, no new proposals will be considered until 2011. Similarly, the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS

Relief (PEPFAR) plans to ‘flat-fund’ its programs for the next two years, reneging on promises made last year to support expanded treatment access,” an MSF official said at a Nov. 5 press conference.

Ghost busting: Dr. Rajashakher Reddy, the president of Atlanta, Georgia-based teleradiology services provider Reddy Solutions, has been charged by the United States government with “ghosting” — that is, signing reports on films or data he didn't review. The indictment alleges that, from May 2007 to January 2008, Reddy submitted thousands of reports in this manner. On more than 40 000 occasions, it is alleged, Reddy falsely submitted reports under his name — reports that earned his company US\$1.5 million. The radiologist has been charged with wire fraud, mail fraud, health care fraud and obstruction of justice. If convicted, he could face a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison.

Isotope bill: The United States House of Representatives has voted in favour of a bill that will give US\$163 million over five years to help create a domestic producer of technetium-99m, a medical isotope used widely in diagnostic medicine. Some nuclear medicine experts claim this will prove beneficial to US citizens but could cause a huge financial loss for Canada, which supplies the US with isotopes. The latest extended shutdown of the 52-year-old National Research Universal reactor in Chalk River, Ontario, is believed to be part of the reason the bill passed so easily (by a 400–17 vote). The bill is now on its way to the US Senate for approval.

Mass vaccination: Beginning Nov. 23, health workers in three African countries are scheduled to launch a week-long campaign to vaccinate close to 12 million citizens against yellow fever. The mass vaccination campaign is supported by groups including the World

Health Organization, UNICEF and Médecins sans Frontières, and is funded primarily through a US\$103-million contribution from the GAVI Alliance (formerly known as the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation). The 11.9 million people targeted by the campaign are in Benin, Liberia and Sierra Leone — all countries at high risk of yellow fever outbreaks, according to the organizations. Since 2007, a total of 29 million people in six African countries have been vaccinated against yellow fever, but without further funding for prevention and stockpiles of vaccines, 160 million could still be at risk, officials say.

Drug dangers: Many dementia patients are needlessly being given anti-psychotic drugs which may be contributing to their deaths, according to an expert review commissioned by the United Kingdom government. The review suggests that nearly 150 000 of the 180 000 or so dementia patients in the UK on these drugs are not benefiting from them — in fact, the drugs are linked to 1800 deaths. To reduce the unnecessary use of anti-psychotics, the government has pledged to take the following steps: improve access to other types of therapy, better monitor prescribing practices, provide guidance for families on the use of these drugs, train medical staff on dementia and appoint a new national director of dementia.

Super clinics: The Australian government's plan to build "super clinics" has angered many family doctors who claim the new program will force traditional general practitioners out of business. In early November, some 140 family doctors gathered in Sydney to rally against the super-clinic program, which government officials say is intended to complement existing services and lessen the burden on hospitals. The government already has contracts in place to run 27 of the 36 proposed centres. Concerned doctors

have formed a lobbying group, Doctors Action, to protest the program. Opponents of super clinics claim they will be impersonal and will damage relationships between doctors and patients.

H1N1 peaks: The H1N1 flu may have peaked in parts of Western Europe and the United States, though cases are still increasing in Eastern Europe and Asia, according to World Health Organization (WHO) officials. In a statement, the WHO said there are "early signs of a peak in disease activity in some areas of the northern hemisphere." Officials with the US Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention have also reported some declines in flu activity in the United States since Oct. 27. By contrast, sharp increases in flu-like illnesses are being reported in Norway, Lithuania, Israel, Serbia, Uzbekistan and parts of Afghanistan. The spread of the flu from west to east in the world is typical, health officials say, except the pattern started earlier than normal in 2009.

Mummy hearts: A team of cardiologists in the United States has found, after scanning mummies using computerized axial tomography technology, that people in ancient times likely had cardiovascular diseases that are often thought of as modern ailments. Traditional wisdom suggests that modern lifestyles — characterized by high stress, fatty diets and sedentary routines — are mainly responsible for cardiovascular diseases. But the cardiologists found that mummies had a buildup of cholesterol and scar tissue in the walls of their arteries — problems that can lead to heart attack and stroke. The findings have prompted cardiologists to suggest that factors beyond diet and lifestyle should be considered in determining the cause and progression of cardiovascular diseases.

Football fallout: The National Football League in the United States

appears ready to change direction in its approach to assessing the long-term health effects of player concussions, as indicated by the recent resignation of the two cochairmen of the league's brain injuries committee. The former cochairmen, Dr. Ira Casson and Dr. David Viano, have long been criticized by their medical peers for downplaying the link between player head injuries and dementia. Several retired players have suffered serious cognitive decline in recent years, but the brain injury committee has dismissed independent studies linking this problem to concussions the players suffered during their playing careers. The league recently announced that it would be seeking independent sources of expertise to join the committee and, upon recommendation from the US Congress, that it will begin televising public-service announcements on head injuries.

Cherry picking: Private treatment centres in the United Kingdom take on less risky patients while getting paid the same rates as publicly-funded hospitals, according to an analysis of more than 3.3 million patient records by the Department of Health. The report suggests that patients treated in private centres are less likely to come from low-income areas, have fewer diagnoses and undergo fewer procedures than people treated in hospitals run by the National Health Service. Private centres receive some public funding to carry out many procedures, such as hip and knee replacements, in an effort to relieve the burden on public hospitals. It was found that public hospitals handle more complex cases, prompting some medical-policy experts to suggest that payment systems be refined to reflect the differences in the practices between public hospitals and private treatment centres. — Roger Collier and Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.109-3121