

Briefly

Published at www.cmaj.ca between July 12 and Aug. 9

Banting fellowships: Prime Minister Stephen Harper has officially unveiled the federal government's plan to set aside \$45 million to create 70 postgraduate fellowships annually in each of the next five years. Valued at \$70 000 annually for two years, the fellowships are named in honour of Nobel laureate Sir Frederick Banting and were promised in last April's federal budget (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3201). The Fellowships will be available to both domestic and international applicants. Up to 25% of Canadian recipients will be entitled to use their fellowships at foreign institutions. Harper also announced that Canada will provide \$20 million to create five new African Institute for Mathematical Sciences centres by 2015. The centres will be established as part of the Next Einstein Initiative, which is endeavouring to create 15 centres in mathematics, technology and science across Africa by 2015 (www.nexteinstein.org/). — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Haiti hiatus: Health care in Haiti has "substantially improved" since the devastating Jan. 12 earthquake "and in some respects is better than before it," Médecins Sans Frontières says in a report on conditions in the Caribbean country six months after the natural disaster. "Numbers of poor people who before the disaster were effectively excluded from the public and private systems are now able to get attention. The range of medical care in new, temporary structures and in some of the surviving hospitals and clinics is substantially greater and nearer to the people, although issues of quality remain," states the report, *Emergency Response After the Haiti Earthquake: Choices, Obstacles, Activities and Finance*. But long-term funding for health care, the reconstruction of lasting facilities and the availability of trained health care

professionals are among constraints, adds the report (www.msf.org/source/countries/americas/haiti/2010/6months/haiti_6_months.pdf). "The earthquake destroyed 60 per cent of the health facilities and 10 per cent of the medical staff were either killed or left the country." — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Avoid shopping: A German urologist claims his research team has found compelling, but as yet unpublished, evidence that men should not go shopping because it could cause impotence. Hamburg-based Frank Sommer says that there is enough bisphenol A on till receipts to suppress male hormones. "A substance like that could shift the balance of the sex hormones in men towards oestrogen," Sommer told *The Telegraph*. "In the long term this leads to less sexual drive, encourages the belly instead of the muscles to grow and has a bad effect on erection and potency" (www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/7861156/Sex-and-shopping-how-retail-therapy-really-is-bad-for-mens-health-and-fertility.html). Canada has banned the importation, sale and advertising of polycarbonate baby bottles which contain bisphenol A. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Industry funding declines: The so-called "patent cliff" prompted the world's major brand-name pharmaceutical firms to chop their budgets for research and development (R&D) in 2009, according to the *2010 Pharmaceutical R&D Factbook*. Data compiled by CMR International indicates that drugmakers reduced their R&D expenditures by 0.3% in 2009, after a 6.6% increase in 2009 (<http://cmr.thomsonreuters.com/>). The statistics also indicated the industry invests the highest percentage of its outlays, 17.9%, in the pursuit of anti-cancer drugs. Just 7% of industry sales in 2009 were generated by drugs launched in the past five years. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Product development partnership: The Global Alliance for TB Drug Development and the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative have inked an agreement which allows DNDi to develop a class of potential anti-TB compounds for use in combating neglected tropical diseases such as visceral leishmaniasis, human African trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness) and Chagas disease. "The not-for-profit model demonstrates that there are innovative ways to share knowledge, to avoid duplication in research, thereby saving costs and speeding up the R&D process for the benefit of the patients," Bernard Pécou, executive director of DNDi stated in a press release (www.dndi.org/press-releases/722-tbi-dndi-collaboration.html). — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Diagnostic update: Scientists in the United States are proposing to update the diagnostic criteria for Alzheimer disease for the first time in 25 years. The effort is being led by the National Institute on Aging and the Alzheimer's Association. Workgroups formed to draft proposed changes presented their initial reports on July 13 at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference on Alzheimer's Disease 2010 in Honolulu, Hawaii. "The proposals would change the 1984 criteria by better reflecting the various stages of the disease and the inclusion of Alzheimer's disease biomarkers," William Thies, chief medical and scientific officer at the Alzheimer's Association, said in a press release (www.alz.org/icad/2010_release_diagnostic_071310_130pm.asp). — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

Limiting choice: Private health insurers in the United States are beginning to offer more affordable plans that restrict the choice of doctors and hospitals. Insurers attribute the creation of the new programs to the rise in cost of health care coverage due to the reform of the US health care system. The plans

are targeted at small businesses, which can reduce their premiums by 15%, and are currently being tested in several US cities, including San Diego, California, and Chicago, Illinois. People under the new plans who wish to visit restricted health care providers will have to pay their entire bills themselves. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

Free in-vitro: The province of Quebec will begin paying for in-vitro fertilization in August, Provincial Health Minister Yves Bolduc announced on July 12. This will make Quebec the first jurisdiction in North America to fund costly in-vitro fertilization treatments (typically \$7 000–\$15 000 per cycle). The government expects the new program to increase the number of successful treatments for Quebec couples, while new restrictions on the number of embryos allowed to be implanted at once should reduce the number of multiple births. Private clinics will no longer be allowed to provide in-vitro treatments, a restriction that critics worry will overburden the public health care system and lead to long waiting lists. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

HIV crimes: Canadian courts have convicted 63 people of crimes related to HIV/AIDS transmission, second only to the United States, according to the Global Network of People Living with HIV. Worldwide, more than 600 people have been convicted of crimes for willfully exposing others to the HIV virus. Since 2005, around 50 countries have convicted individuals for such crimes. About 45 of these countries have specific laws on the criminal transmission of HIV/AIDS, while the others use existing laws. Common charges include sexual assault, nuisance and murder. In Canada, the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network is helping to develop guidelines for fair criminal prosecution of crimes related to HIV/AIDS transmission. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

Chief statistician quits: Canadian's chief statistician, Munir Sheikh, resigned on July 21 over the Conservative government's decision to scrap the mandatory long-form census, which

provides population-based data used by researchers in various fields, including health. According to Sheikh, the voluntary survey proposed by the government to replace the long-form census is an inadequate substitute, and under the circumstances, he felt compelled to tender his resignation to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Industry Minister Tony Clement, who is in charge of Statistics Canada, announced that Wayne Smith, assistant chief statistician of business and trade statistics, would take over as chief statistician until a permanent replacement is found. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

Vuvuzela ban: British charities for people with hearing problems are urging UK soccer clubs to ban vuvuzelas, the droning horns brought to the world's attention during the recent World Cup in South Africa. Auditory experts say the horn, which can emit sounds of up to 130 decibels, can cause a ringing in the ears (tinnitus) and even permanent hearing loss for spectators. Groups warning of the possible hearing loss due to vuvuzelas include Deafness Research UK and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People. Eight of the 20 clubs in England's Premier League have already banned the horn. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

Painkiller abuse plan rejected: An advisory panel of doctors and pain experts has rejected a plan by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) aimed at reducing painkiller abuse for being too weak. Panel members voted 25 to 10 against the plan, claiming that it was not strong enough to address the problem. The members also noted that the FDA's plan lacked a requirement for doctors to be trained in the appropriate use of long-acting painkillers, such as oxycodone hydrochloride (OxyContin) and methadone. Instead, the plan contained a provision indicating that doctors could volunteer to undergo training organized by drug companies. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

Unpopular diabetes plan: The Australian government's A\$450-million plan to reform diabetes care is proving unpopular with many doctors, as well

as the Australian Medical Association. Under the plan, medical practices will receive A\$950 annually to treat each patient with type 2 diabetes who enrolls. Critics of the plan claim it will limit patient options and remove them from medicare. In response to criticisms, the government has formed a 16-member advisory group to help form the plan. The Australian Medical Association was invited to join the advisory group but refused because open discussions on the shortcomings of the plan wouldn't be allowed, according to association president Dr. Andrew Pesce. Other medical groups, however, support the plan, including Diabetes Australia and the Australian General Practice Network. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

Discrepancies in Saskatchewan CT scan findings: The Cypress Health Region in Saskatchewan is reviewing more than 7200 computerized tomography (CT) scans after audits uncovered discrepancies between the original interpretation of some scans and the findings of a peer review. The scans were among a variety of diagnostic tests conducted in January 2010 sampled for a quality assurance program run by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan. Based on that sample, 12 patients in the region have been advised to follow up the new findings with their doctors. The review of another batch of tests from January to June 2010 found the concerns were limited to the interpretation of CT scans. Now, the region is contacting another 19 patients for follow up and is launching a review of all CT examinations from January 2008 to May 2010. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

US drinking rates rise: Drinking rates of alcohol in the United States have hit a 25-year high, according to a recent Gallup poll (www.gallup.com/poll/141656/Drinking-Rate-Edges-Slightly-Year-High.aspx). In response to the question — “Do you have occasion to use alcoholic beverages such as liquor, wine, or beer, or are you a total abstainer?” — 67% of American adults said they drink alcohol, a slight increase over last year and the highest

reading recorded since 1985. Younger Americans were more likely to drink alcohol than older Americans; only 59% of respondents aged 55 and older said they were drinkers, compared to 72% of those aged 18–54. Despite some yearly fluctuations, the percentage of Americans who say they drink alcohol has been stable over Gallup's 71 years of tracking consumption rates. Beer remains the alcoholic beverage of choice among Americans, followed by wine and liquor. The high point for drinking occurred between 1976 and 1978, when 71% of Americans polled said they drank alcohol. The low point was recorded in 1958, at 55%. When Gallup first asked Americans about drinking at the tail-end of the Great Depression in 1939, 58% of adults said they were drinkers. The results for the poll are based on telephone interviews with a random sample of 1020 adults, aged 18 and older. — Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

Japanese longevity: The average Japanese woman can expect to live 86.4 years, a new world record. Based on 2009 statistics, this life expectancy is almost five months longer than in 2008. Women from Hong Kong, China, have the second-longest life expectancy, and women from France come in third. Japanese men also added time to their life spans, an additional four months for a total of 79.5 years.

Unlike women, however, men in Japan do not top the global rankings, placing fifth, after men in Qatar, Hong Kong, Iceland and Switzerland. Health experts attribute the longevity of Japanese citizens to healthy diets of fish and vegetables, as well as easy access to health care and a high standard of living. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

Genetic test clampdown: The government of the United Kingdom is planning on establishing rules to regulate companies that sell private genetic tests. The Human Genetics Commission, which advises the UK government on genetic issues, has created a framework which will compel these companies to adhere to principles of consent, data protection, accurate marketing and sound science. Health experts are concerned that the booming market for private genetic tests, which is unregulated, is resulting in consumers being sold false hope based on shoddy science. Under the forthcoming rules, claims about private genetic tests should be backed by articles in reliable medical journals, and consumers must be informed of possible outcomes and, in some circumstances, offered counselling. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

Health law opposition: Missouri voters have approved a measure to invalidate an element of US President

Barack Obama's health care law that will penalize people without health insurance. Missouri is the first state to vote on any part of Obama's health care reforms. The Aug. 2 referendum, called Proposition C, drew 939 000 voters, 71% of whom supported the measure. Legal experts note that it is difficult to know if the referendum will have any effect. The insurance requirement of the federal health law does not come into effect until 2014 and by then, legal experts claim, federal courts will likely have tackled the issue. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

China fights HIV and TB: China's Ministry of Health has announced a plan to help people who are infected with both the HIV virus and tuberculosis. Among residents of China whose immune systems have been weakened by the HIV virus, tuberculosis is one of the leading causes of death. The health ministry is calling for data sharing and cooperation in testing between HIV/AIDS prevention authorities and centres that treat tuberculosis. Patients coinfecting with HIV and tuberculosis will receive free treatment and follow-up care. It is estimated that at least 700 000 people in China have the HIV virus. Approximately 4.5 million people in China have tuberculosis, second only to India. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.109-3332