

Too many sick infants, not enough nurses

There was no room at the inn for some East Coast babies in March when the Maritimes' only intensive care unit for critically ill newborns was forced to examine whether it could admit any new patients on a case-by-case basis. In 3 instances, the IWK Grace Health Centre in Halifax sent infants to hospitals in New Brunswick and Montreal, and one high-risk pregnant mother was also sent to a hospital outside the province.

Rick Nurse, the hospital's president and CEO, says demand for the Special Care Nursery is often unpredictable due to the complexity of care and the prolonged length of stay for some of the tiny patients. "However, this [March] was an exceptional circumstance — the IWK Grace has never before experienced such a high level of critical care patient activity in this unit."

The special nursery can accommodate 40 infants. Usually 5 to 12 of them are getting breathing assistance from a ventilator and require one-on-one nursing care. In March, however, at least 15 infants needed a ventilator and another 18 women were at risk of early labour. It was the lack of specialized nursing care — and not a shortage of hospital beds — that forced the IWK Grace to send patients elsewhere.

Heather Henderson, president of the Nova Scotia Nurses Union, said the province is currently experiencing a severe shortage of nurses, especially in specialty areas. She estimates that 650 more nurses are needed in the province.

Nurse admits that the hospital does not know whether demand for the services provided by the special nursery was a "blip" or an indication of an ongoing requirement. Health Minister Jamie Muir says the situation was a "blip," and the hospital will receive no more money for additional nurses. — *Donalee Moulton, Halifax*

Bleak AIDS news from South Africa

The *South African Medical Journal* says the AIDS situation in that country is so grim that life expectancy will probably plunge from 64 to 47 years during the next 12 years. Unlike Canada, where the number of AIDS cases is declining, South Africa is being attacked by the disease at all levels.

The *SAMJ* says 200 HIV-infected babies are being born in the country every day; roughly 3 million South Africans — 1 in 10 — are infected with the virus. The South African Department of Health says the country has "failed dismally in controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS in our country. It is disconcerting that of the 20 million cases of HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa, 2.8 million come from this country, even though the epidemic here started later than in other parts of Africa." — *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*

Physicians fight for access to tobacco info, hope to show criminal negligence

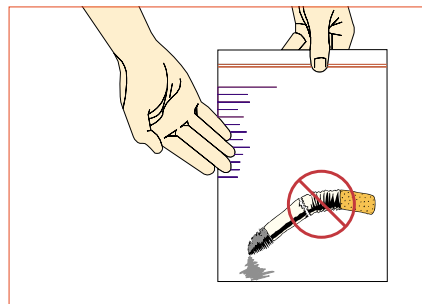
A group representing 500 antismoking physicians wants access to thousands of tobacco industry documents to help it "make sense of the science" and contribute to evidence that may lead to criminal charges against the companies.

As the British Columbia and Ontario governments sought to win civil suits against tobacco manufacturers, Physicians For a Smoke-Free Canada filed a suit Mar. 1 under the Freedom of Information Act to gain access to documents the BC government had gathered. The case should be resolved within 90 days, says executive director Cynthia Callard.

Ultimately, the physician group wants to use the information to assess whether the companies had a "wanton disregard for human health and safety," says Callard. If so, criminal charges could be the next step.

The BC government launched a suit against 3 Canadian tobacco companies in November 1998 over the cost of treating smokers. It alleges the industry knew smoking was harmful but didn't tell the public. The case was dismissed because BC laws prohibit the province from suing multinational companies. That legislation may be altered so the suit can proceed. The BC lawsuit follows a multibillion-dollar settlement in the US, under which 27 million pages of tobacco industry documents were released.

The documents the BC government



is withholding come from the UK-based Imperial Tobacco Ltd., which manufactures 70% of cigarettes smoked in Canada. The parent company, British American Tobacco Co. Ltd., agreed to release the documents, but they can only be accessed in person in Guildford, England — a trip the physician group could afford to take only once.

The province says releasing the documents may interfere with the conduct of its court case, but Callard is concerned the papers may never come to light if the government settles out of court. She says many of the documents concern progress reports from tobacco research laboratories in Montreal.

The physician's group posted the documents it gathered from the UK depository at www.tobaccopapers.org. Health Canada documents from the same repository are at www.cctc.ca/nctn/guildford. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*