

## UK restrictions aimed at alcohol ads for teens

Stung by complaints that retailers continue to market alcohol to young people, British manufacturers have proposed an advertising crackdown. The Portman Group, whose member companies produce 95% of the alcoholic drinks sold in the UK, announced that it is revising its 6-year-old marketing standards code to cover branded merchandise and promotions.

Britain's legal drinking age is 18, and some watchdog organizations have detected a steady increase in alcohol con-

sumption by underage drinkers during the last 50 years. A report by the Institute of Alcohol Studies said that alcohol played no significant part in youth culture until the 1960s, when pubs and bars started replacing coffee houses as the preferred gathering place. According to Department of Health statistics, a majority of young Britons drink regularly by age 14 or 15, and since 1990 the amount of alcohol they consume has doubled, to 10.4 units per week. Britain's Home Office says underage drinkers find it easy to buy alcohol, with 63% of 16- and 17-year-olds and 10% of those aged 12 to 15 who drink reporting that they have been able to purchase drinks in pubs. All the underage drinkers indicated that roughly half the time they drank alcohol either in their own homes or someone else's home, which suggested a measure of adult complicity.

The same survey showed that underage drinkers preferred beer over any other alcoholic beverage, followed by spirits and wine. While consumption of "alcopops" — sweetened alcoholic drinks — lagged behind other beverages, a Scottish study found that children and

teens who drank these products were significantly more likely to report having been inebriated. — *Mary Helen Spooner*, West Sussex, UK



Bottoms up

## MDs win right to sue HMOs for racketeering

When American physicians are upset about their fees, they don't go on strike — they go to court.

Thanks to a recent court ruling, 600 000 physicians have been given the right to sue some of the nation's largest HMOs for fraud and racketeering. The ruling allows the doctors, who are supported by 5 state medical societies, to press a class-action suit claiming that they have been systematically defrauded by HMOs that arbitrarily and routinely cut fees.

The amount of the claim has not yet been determined, but lawyers say hundreds of millions of dollars have been swallowed by HMOs that "downcode" doctors' billings, retroactively deny claims for medically necessary services and offer bonuses to claims reviewers who delay or deny claims. For instance, lawyers allege that a "25-minute visit of moderate/high complexity with an established patient" is commonly downcoded to a 15-minute visit of low/moderate complexity, which saves the HMO \$50 or more.

The suit identifies 9 companies, including Aetna and Humana Health Plan, as co-conspirators. It was originally filed by the California Medical Association, and the action was subsequently joined by medical societies in Florida, Texas, Georgia and Louisiana. Any doctor who accepted HMO patients after 1990 can participate.

"America's physicians ... are determined to restore sanity and fair play to what has become a very disturbing industry," says Archie Lamb, a lawyer for the doctors. "Call it cheating. That's what it is."

Karen Ignani, president of the American Association of Health Plans, which represents the nation's HMOs, called the charges "trumped up" and doubts that 600 000 physicians qualify for the class action. — *Milan Korcok*, Florida

## Cheap vaccine needed for Africa's meningitis epidemic

With an epidemic of a rare strain of meningitis threatening to infect up to 4 million Africans by January, the World Health Organization (WHO) has made an urgent plea for an affordable vaccine.

Before 2002, nearly all cases of meningitis in Africa were caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* type A. In January, cases involving infection by serotype W135 began accumulating, and continued through the end of the meningitis season in May. More than 12 000 people were infected by W135, and 8.5% of them died.

*N. meningitidis* W135 has caused sporadic cases for nearly 60 years, but it never received much attention until outbreaks in Europe in 2000 were associated with the hajj to Mecca. In 2001, many countries began vaccinating travellers to the Middle East with a tetravalent vaccine effective against strains A, C, Y and W135. However, the cost of US\$5 per dose is prohibitive for poor African countries like Burkina Faso.

At a recent WHO meeting in Burkina Faso, participants suggested the vaccines should not cost more than US\$1. WHO, UNICEF, Médecins Sans Frontières and the Red Cross are negotiating with manufacturers for a lower vaccine price. Development of a monovalent vaccine against the W135 strain is expected to take up to 18 months, which would be far too late for the upcoming meningitis season.

The largest outbreaks of meningococcal meningitis, the only form of bacterial meningitis to cause epidemics, are in sub-Saharan Africa within the "meningitis belt" that extends from Ethiopia to Senegal. Burkina Faso alone reported 42 000 cases in 1997. — *James Maskalyk*, CMAJ