

News @ a glance

New medical school delayed: The launch of Canada's first rural medical school has been put back a year. The Northern Ontario Medical School, which will have distinct campuses in Sudbury and Thunder Bay, has had a difficult birthing process. This spring, the 2 campus deans resigned within weeks of being appointed (*CMAJ* 2003;168[10]:1307). "Innovation takes time," explained spokesperson Dr. David Boyle. The first students will now be admitted in September 2005.

A whopping award: Canadian MDs who think their CMPA fees are too high should consider themselves lucky. Large hospitals in New York City are facing premium increases of US\$20 million after a judge ordered a hospital to pay US\$140 million to a child who suffered brain damage following surgery. One insurance expert told the *New York Times*: "Assuming there is no fix, we're projecting that medical malpractice premium costs will at least double. In some cases, particularly some of the smaller hospitals, I think the insurers just won't write coverage at all." The child suffered the damage after a shunt failed to relieve pressure on the brain.

Viga ain't Viagra: Consumers in the US are being warned not to use Viga, a dietary supplement that supposedly increases "desire, confidence and sexual performance." The product contains sildenafil, and the US Food and Drug Administration says the interaction between it and nitrates can cause serious hypotension.

Farmers at risk? A recent report in the UK indicated that farmers may be at increased risk of mental health problems because of financial and other issues, so



Canadian physicians want to play close attention to new information from Statistics Canada. The data indicate that net cash income fell by 10.6% in 2002. Total net income plunged to \$2 billion the same

year, to the lowest level since 1983, and prairie farmers are contending with drought, dwindling stocks of grain, BSE and increased feed costs.

Tobacco treaty adopted: The world's first antismoking treaty was adopted unanimously May 21 by the 192 member countries of the World Health Organization (*CMAJ* 2003;168[10]:1263-4). The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is designed to reduce tobacco consumption through higher taxes and stronger health warnings. The treaty either bans tobacco advertising and promotion or, in countries like the US where a total prohibition would violate the constitution, restricts it. Two-thirds of the 1.2 billion people who smoke live in the developing world.



NB wants med school: Canada's labour minister is keen to open a new medical school in New Brunswick. Successive health ministers have rejected Claudette Bradshaw's idea as too expensive, but the Moncton MP now has support from Premier Bernard Lord. Canada has not opened a new medical school in more than 30 years.

New suicide research centre: Canada's first suicide research centre, the McGill Group for Suicide Studies, will identify risk factors associated with suicide by studying DNA from people who have killed themselves. "It's possible that genes might play a role," says director Gustav Turecki. The 40-member multidisciplinary research team, which will be based at the Douglas Hospital in Montreal, will also interview the person's family and complete a psychosocial assessment.

Mom sues over HIV: An Ontario woman is suing 3 physicians who failed to test her for HIV during her pregnancy; she subsequently infected the baby. The *Globe and Mail* says the woman, who asked not to be identified to protect the identity of her child, argues that she would have sought treatment had she known she was infected.

Dementia epidemic? A report anticipates that half-a-million Australians will experience dementia by 2040 — triple the current number — and it will cost \$6 billion a year to treat them. The Alzheimer Australia report said the prevalence of dementia will overtake depression as the number one source of disability by 2015.

BC MDs launch class action: BC's highest court says physicians there can launch a class-action suit seeking payment for billings that were rejected by the province. BC has been rejecting bills on the grounds that patients were not proper beneficiaries because they either hadn't

paid their medicare premiums or hadn't had contact with the plan for a year. But emergency physician James Alvorson says the province promised in 1996 to cover all residents "including those in arrears on premiums."

High cost of obesity: The cost to treat illnesses related to obesity now rivals the cost for smoking-related disease, an analysis underwritten by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates (www.healthaffairs.org). Economist Eric Finkelstein says after years of debate over whether obesity is a personal or societal issue, the findings offer a "clear motivation" to consider strategies aimed at reducing the prevalence of obesity in the US, where it has increased by about 70% in the past decade.



Bone of contention for chiropractors: Quebec's chiropractors are marching, lobbying and writing letters to protest a court judgement forbidding anyone but physicians from diagnosing patients. Quebec is the only jurisdiction in North America in which chiropractors cannot diagnose their patients. — *CMAJ*