

News @ a glance

Canada lags in MD ratio: Canada has one of the lowest physician-to-population ratios in the Western world, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports. In 2000, Canada had 2.1 practising physicians per 1000 population, while the average among the 30 OECD nations was 2.9. Greece topped the scale at 4.4, followed by the Slovak Republic (3.6), Hungary and Switzerland (3.5), the Czech Republic (3.4) and France, Germany and Holland (3.3). The US has 2.7 physicians per 1000 population. The only OECD countries with a lower number than Canada were Mexico (1.5), Korea (1.4) and Turkey (1.3).

Nature demands disclosure: Authors of review articles appearing in journals published by the Nature Publishing Group must now disclose financial ties to any products they evaluate. The new policy arose after a conflict-of-interest case in 2002 involving an article in *Nature Neuroscience* that evaluated experimental treatments for depression. The lead author had significant financial stakes in 3 of the therapies he reviewed favourably. The journal had not asked him to disclose conflicts. *CMAJ* instituted conflict-of-interest rules in September 2001 (*CMAJ* 2001;165[6]:786-8).

Ticked off: Nothing ticks Dr. Robert Webster off more than a pest that carries disease. So the family physician, originally from Yarmouth, NS, patented a gadget that removes ticks from humans and animals and also allows the insect to be captured for disposal. Webster first attempted to create a device to remove ticks from his family dog. Several versions and 14 years



later, the Tick Remover, which is the size and shape of tweezers, was patented. Ticks are a vector for Lyme disease, which is becoming more common in Canada. — *Donalee Moulton, Halifax*

Remembering Dr. Drake: Neurosurgeon Charles Drake, whose techniques for repairing brain aneurysms gained him worldwide fame, was recently commemorated with a memorial garden and bronze sculpture in London, Ont. Drake, who died in 1998, was chair of clinical neurological sciences at the University of Western Ontario and chief of neurosurgery at the London Health Sciences Centre. His widow, Ruth Drake-Alloway (left), and a former patient, singer Della Reese, participated in the unveiling.



Tobacco pays for fire victim: Breaking with a long-standing practice, US cigarette maker Philip Morris paid US\$2 million to settle the case of a child who suffered extensive burns in a fire allegedly caused by a smoldering cigarette. In the past 2 decades, about 15 cigarette-related-fire lawsuits were filed in the US, but all were dismissed before trial. This settlement resolved a 9-year legal dispute. Shannon Moore was 21 months old and asleep in her car seat when the car caught fire. She suffered burns over 77% of her body and had all her fingers amputated. Philip Morris argued there was no proof a cigarette caused the fire, and that Moore's mother was to blame for leaving the child unattended. This is the first time Philip Morris has agreed to pay damages in a personal-injury case.

Practical nurses: The use of licensed practical nurses (LPNs) varies widely across Canada, from a low of 10.3 per 10 000 people in BC to a high of 51.9 in Newfoundland. A report on LPNs by the Canadian Institute for Health Information reveals that most of them work in hospitals (47.9%) and long-term-care facilities (36.4%). In 2002, 60 123 LPNs were employed in Canada, compared with 230 957 registered nurses.

New compassionate care benefits:

The federal government is introducing benefits to help Canadians care for gravely ill relatives. The new Employment Insurance Compassionate Care Benefit, which takes effect Jan. 4, 2004, will allow eligible claimants up to 6 weeks of benefits to care for a close relative. An insert on the program is included with this issue of *CMAJ*, and more

information is available at www.hrdc.gc.ca. A physician's signature is required.

Cleaning up: Canadians appear to be heeding the public health mantra about washing their hands. Researchers observing people at Toronto's Pearson Airport in August found that 95% of men and 97% of women washed their hands with soap and water after using washroom facilities. Similar surveys by the American Society of Microbiology at major US airports in 1996 and 2000 showed about 67% of adults did this. The researchers speculate that the increased handwashing may be linked to fears about SARS.

Nigerian polio outbreak: A polio outbreak in Nigeria put 15 million children in neighbouring countries at risk, and undermined efforts to eradicate the disease, says the World Health Organization. In late October, nearly a dozen children were paralyzed from poliovirus genetically traced to northern Nigeria. Thousands of volunteers and health workers in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Niger and Togo began a 3-day, US\$10-million immunization blitz Oct. 22. Nigeria had 178 cases of polio as of mid-October — the greatest number in the world. By working with local health officials throughout the country, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative hopes it will be able to make Nigeria polio free by December 2004.

— Compiled by *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*