

News @ a glance

Polio spreads: Polio has spread from Nigeria to 6 other West African countries, threatening to undermine WHO's efforts to eradicate the disease by 2005. Fortunately the spread — most recently to Benin and Cameroon — has been limited to fewer than 25 cases in all. However, Nigeria reported nearly 300 new polio cases in 2003, about half the world total. The cases there are primarily due to opposition to the



WHO

vaccine by some Islamic leaders in the state of Kano, Nigeria, who contend it contains hormones that sterilize girls. WHO strongly disputes this contention.

Organ trafficking: The European parliament has overwhelmingly supported wide-ranging moves to stamp out the growing phenomenon of trafficking in human organs. The measures would make it a criminal offence for European Union (EU) citizens to go abroad and pay for organ transplants (so-called "transplant tourism") and introduce a minimum 10-year prison sentence for anyone caught trafficking individuals into the EU for the purpose of using their organs for transplantation. The proposals also tackle the severe shortage of legitimately acquired organs, and include setting up European databases of available organs and patients requiring transplants. The plans are now awaiting ap-

proval by the Council of the European Union. — *Cathel Kerr*, Fife, Scotland

UK to curb "health tourism": Beginning in April, people without UK citizenship or residency seeking treatment in Britain will have to pay in advance. The policy, which aims to impede "health tourism," may compromise doctors' duty of care, says the British Medical Association (BMA). It is not the role of doctors to be the agents of the state in policing eligibility for health care, the BMA states. The association is particularly concerned about failed asylum seekers who have no access to money: "It would be totally unjustifiable to leave them suffering." Paul Kind, a University of York professor who analyzed the survey on the prevalence of "health tourism," questions the government's rationale for taking action. This is "not an issue of any magnitude or importance, and the idea that British hospitals are

being swamped with people who try to abuse the NHS is clearly not sustained. ... How would we collect money for people when abuse is the exception rather than the rule?" — *Claudia Orellana*, Tübingen, Germany

Culture of patient safety: Nova Scotia's new Health Care Safety Working Group, charged with looking out for patient safety, is expected to come forward with recommendations for improvements this spring. "This working group ... provides a structure to get safety information out regularly, and will help change the concept of patient safety from being an isolated problem to becoming a universal goal," says member Dr. Pat Crosskerry, founder of an international safety conference. The group is preparing a plan to help district health authorities enhance safety. "This working group will be a way for hospitals, nursing homes and others to share best practices and review up-to-date information," notes Health Minister Angus MacIsaac.— *Donalee Moulton*, Halifax

Psychologists pronounce on same-sex marriage: The Canadian Psychological Association has made it clear it doesn't need any more time to analyze the pros and cons of same-sex marriages. "There is no evidence in scientific literature that children raised by gay and lesbian parents have negative outcomes when compared with children raised by heterosexual couples," says CPA president Patrick O'Neill. "To the extent that if there are any differences, they actually tend to favour same-sex couples." — *Christopher Guly*, Ottawa



Quebec fights PIPEDA: In a surprise move, the Quebec government served notice in late December that it will be challenging the constitutionality of the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (*CMAJ* 2003;169[11]:1200), which is adding to the workload of businesses — and physicians

— across Canada. Quebec maintains that the federal statute represents an incursion into its exclusive provincial rights. The challenge will probably begin in the Quebec Court of Appeal this year and work its way to the Supreme Court of Canada by 2005.

Ontario loosens welfare policy: The new Liberal government has repealed a law that banned people convicted of welfare fraud from receiving social assistance (*CMAJ* 2001; 164[1]:5). The law, implemented by the former Conservative government, was the only one of its kind in North America. The move comes more than a year after a coroner's jury recommended the law be repealed following the death in August 2001 of Kimberly Rogers, a 40-year-old pregnant woman who was under house arrest for welfare fraud. The change drew praise from social activists. — Compiled by *Barbara Sibbald*, CMAJ