

News @ a glance

Von Hagens accused of exhibiting firing squad victims:

The German pathologist Günther von Hagens, whose touring corpse-art exhibition *Body Worlds* has drawn millions of visitors (*CMAJ* 2003;169[1]:52-3), is facing accusations of using executed people as exhibits. The German weekly magazine, *Der Spiegel*, revealed that bodies stored at his headquarters in China had bullet holes in their skulls. On Jan. 22, von Hagens agreed to return 7 corpses after admitting he could not prove the bodies did not belong to executed prisoners. He claimed he had only just realized that 7 corpses in his collection had head injuries. Despite inspiring fascination among spectators, von Hagens has met with criticism from protesters and doctors. Manfred Stolte, spokesperson for the German Pathology Society (DGP) said, "For centuries there have been anatomical collections for learning, and not for commercial or voyeuristic purposes. A precondition of any such exhibition is that the

dignity of dead people should be respected." The DGP is also against public autopsies, such as the live-televised one carried out by von Hagens in London in 2002. — *Claudia Orellana*, Tübingen, Germany

Infant mortality rises in US:

For the first time since 1958, the US infant mortality rate (IMR) increased in 2002. The increase from 6.8 deaths per 1000 live births in 2001 to 7 deaths per 1000 in 2002, may reflect the trend toward delaying motherhood, reports Joyce Martin, the lead statistician for the US Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention. Women in their mid-30s and 40s are more likely to have babies with medical complications. In addition, older women are more likely to use fertility drugs, which often lead to multiple births. These births carry a higher risk of premature labour and low birthweight. According to the most recent Health Canada data, the IMR here was 5.3 deaths per 1000 live births in 1999. This is a decline from 7.3 in 1987. Japan has the world's lowest IMR at 3.4. By comparison, Afghanistan has an IMR of 165 per 1000.

Medicare on trial: A case due to come before the Supreme Court of Canada on June 8 is ostensibly about 2 sections of Quebec's medicare legislation, but affidavits filed by several parties suggest that Canada's medicare system as a whole may be on trial. *Chaoulli and Zeliotis v. Quebec* is an appeal of 2 earlier judgements in Quebec courts that upheld the constitutionality of provincial legisla-



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tion prohibiting the use of private insurance to cover medical acts provided within the medicare system. Dr. Jacques Chaoulli, a Montréal GP, and George Zeliotis, a patient who had to wait to receive hip replacement surgery, have also challenged legislation that prevents physicians from providing private surgical or emergency services in publicly funded hospitals. A number of parties have been granted intervener status at the trial, including the Canadian Labour Congress and the CMA. — *Pat Sullivan, CMA*

UK animal lab shelved: Neuroscience research in the UK was thrown into disarray when Cambridge University announced in January that it was shelving plans to build a controversial lab dedicated to research on primates. The university said it couldn't meet the cost of securing the lab from militant animal rights activists. Estimated costs for the project had risen from £24 million to £32 million. The lab was supposed to focus on research into Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. Cambridge University said work using primates would

continue at the university and that animal rights groups had not won any of the arguments. The National Anti-Vivisection Society and Animal Aid stated that "A centre of excellence in the field of brain research is better served by using modern techniques such as brain scanning equipment." — *Colin Meek, Wester Ross, Scotland*

World's most asthma: More people in the UK have asthma than anywhere else in the world, reports the Global Initiative for Asthma. Scotland is the worst affected with >18% of the population experiencing asthma symptoms. By comparison, the rates in Switzerland and Greece are 2.3% and 1.9% respectively. The National Asthma Campaign Scotland attributed the increase to changes in diet, housing, environmental factors and genetics. "What is certain is that we need better control of asthma symptoms," campaign organizers state. "We estimate that up to 90% of people with asthma can live symptom free if they use the right medication, in the right way at the right time." — *Cathel Kerr, Fife, Scotland*

Doctors should work in the third world: The World Medical Association (WMA) is urging its 80 medical association members to encourage medical students and doctors in training to work in a poorer nation. "Such experience will change their lives and enable them to take on the challenging task of advocacy for the needs of the poorer nations and promote positive changes in the future," said WMA President Dr. James Appleyard. The World Bank estimates the gap between the richer 20% of nations and the 20% of poorer nations could be bridged if the burden of infectious disease were lifted. Dr. Diane Lacaille, chair of the board of Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief, applauded the resolution. "They may change the attitude of Canadians and physicians." — *Compiled by Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



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