

News @ a glance

Master's in Global Health:

Canada's first master's program in global health is slated to begin in the fall of 2006 at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. The interdisciplinary, participatory program will emphasize population and public health and health transitions in less developed communities through the study of sociopolitical and cultural determinants of health. The 10-course program delivered over 2 semesters is designed for health professionals and those planning to work in international health. Program topics include health research methods, epidemiology of disease, health promotion and disease prevention, health and security and more. "More and more people are interested in working internationally, plus lots of interna-

tional students are coming to North America, but many go to the US for programs. This is a way to bring them to Canada," said Dean of Health Sciences, Dr. David MacLean. Physicians are invited to complete a survey to help shape the program (www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=74673628837).

Discount drugs: Pharmaceutical giant Pfizer Inc. is offering discounts on prescription drugs to 43 million uninsured Americans, a move analysts said could be aimed at countering growing pressure for US cost controls. Under the "Pfizer Pfriends" program, uninsured families making less than \$45 000 a year will be eligible for average savings of 37%, and uninsured, higher income families could get average savings of 15%. However, analysts said the move may be in the company's best interest. Brandon Carl, a securi-

ties analyst for North Carolina-based BB&T Asset Management Inc., which owns 1.8 million shares of Pfizer, said the move appears to be an effort to take "a proactive stance ahead of some of the major changes that could take place in coming years." He pointed to growing pressure for drug price controls and reimportation of lower-priced drugs from Canada and elsewhere. "They want to position themselves so that they're not trying to stand in the way of an obvious problem with the inflation of drug prices," Carl said. The average price of the top 30 brand-name drugs used by senior citizens in the US rose 22% over the past 3 years, according to a study by the advocacy group Families USA. Dr. Steven Morgan, a health economist at the Centre for Health Services and Policy Research at the University of British Columbia, said the Pfizer program fails to get to



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the heart of the problem, the need for “demand-style systems or government regulations that ensure everyone pays the same price.”

Donor hearts needed: A shortage of donor hearts is forcing Canadian transplant physicians to go to the United States for organs as hospitals turn to implanting ventricular assistive devices (VADs) in patients waiting for new hearts. Even though more transplant patients are surviving, Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) statistics indicate fewer hearts are being transplanted here. Between 1996 and 2002, survival rates climbed to 78%, compared with only 72% from 1990 to 1995. The lack of small hearts for children, and fewer hearts that are medically suitable for adults, has increased Canada’s reliance on organ procurement organizations in the US, says Dr. Vivek Rao, a transplant physician at Toronto

General Hospital and CIHI adviser. In 2002 and 2003, 33 (10%) of the 321 hearts transplanted in Canada were from American donors. Only 3 hearts from Canadian donors were sent to the US. If the United Network for Organ Sharing in the US is unable to place an organ there, they offer it to the nearest provincial procurement agency. Due to deaths on the waiting list here, Rao said 6 Canadian transplant programs have resorted to VADs to support their patients. — *Suzanne Morrison, Oakville, Ont*

Battle of the bulge: The US Institute of Medicine is calling for a national effort to combat childhood obesity, a problem for 9 million children aged 6 and over. The Childhood Obesity Prevention Study (www.iom.edu/report.asp?id=22596) says families, schools, industry, communities and government all have a role to play. The report, issued in response to a 2002 re-

quest from Congress, has plenty of marching orders to go around. Parents and schools, for example, are urged to serve more nutritious meals and promote more active lifestyles in kids, reducing their TV and other “screen time.” Health care professionals are asked to track youngsters’ body mass index and offer counselling. Margo Wootan, policy director of the private Center for Science in the Public Interest, said the recommendations make sense but added: “In the current environment, parents don’t stand a chance. Congress should help parents by requiring calories and other nutrition information on chain-restaurant menus, getting junk foods out of schools, and by directing the Federal Trade Commission to restrict the advertising of junk food to kids.” — Compiled by *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



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