

News @ a glance

Tuition, taxes and death: Tuition fees for medical school went up 9.2% this fall, the largest increase of any faculty, Statistics Canada reports. Fees for undergraduate university students generally rose 3.9%. The average tuition fees for medical school are now \$9977 annually — more than double the \$4172 average for undergraduate programs.

Lung transplants doubled: In the past decade the number of lung transplants performed in Canada has increased 58%. The Canadian Institute for Health Information reports that preliminary data show there were 141 lung transplants in 2002, up from 59 in 1993 (see figure). “The large increase, particularly in bilateral lung transplants ... is due to significant improvements in organ preservation, donor management and surgical technique,” says Dr. Shafique Keshavjee, director of the Toronto Lung Transplant Program. Not only are more lungs being transplanted, survival rates are also improving. Three-year patient survival rates have increased from 40% in the late 1980s, to a current rate of nearly 70%.

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Book ‘em yourself: Many British patients will soon be able to book their own appointments with their family physician online. EMIS Access, software developed in Leeds, has been successfully tested by 150 practices, and 55% of FPs now have access to the program. Through it, patients can view their FPs’ timetables and book or cancel appointments 24 hours a day. Patients can also use the program to send confidential queries. Some clinics already report that up to 15% of their patients are using online booking. The British Medical Association backs the service, but cautions that many socioeconomic groups and age groups don’t use computers.

Human rights course: The World Medical Association has started a Web-based course on human rights and ethics to help doctors working in prisons (www.wma.net). The course, which has been under development for 2 years, was launched coincidentally during revelations about physician’s involvement in the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (*Lancet* 2004;364:725-9). Developed and accredited by the Norwegian Medical Association, the e-course is designed to give

guidance to physicians working in prisons “who detect signs of torture or other degrading treatment and who face dilemmas about their dual loyalty to the state and to their professional ethical code.” Dr. Delon Human, WMA secretary general, said doctors working in prisons in many countries “encounter human rights violations, but do not know how to deal with them adequately.” The course is free. WMA, an independent confederation of more than 80 national medical associations, also issued a statement reiterating its longstanding policy of condemning any physician involvement in abuse of prisoners.

Medicine, not missiles: Students with Physicians for Global Survival (PGS), part of an international physician-based peace movement, recently took aim at the newly minted secretary to the minister of national defence. The PGS students presented a petition and asked MP Keith Martin, a physician, to oppose Canada’s potential involvement in the US ballistic missile defence plan. The US plans to have a basic anti-missile system in place by year end. The petition (www.pgs.ca), signed so far by about 310 medical and dental students, cautions that the “missile shield directly undermines attempts to control nuclear proliferation and foster disarmament efforts, areas in which Canada has traditionally been a leader.” Liam Brunham, the PGS national student representative who delivered the petition, said health care workers have a “responsibility to oppose programs that promote the spread and potential use of nuclear ... weapons, and limit our capacity to respond to the health needs of communities.” Brunham is trying to schedule meetings with other MPs. Canada’s involvement in the US plan may well be a major challenge for the Liberal minority government, as both the Bloc Québécois and the New Democrats oppose it. — Compiled by Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ

