News @ a glance

International MDs: Ottawa announced a \$75-million plan on Apr. 25 to integrate international medical graduates into the Canadian workforce — provided the beleaguered Liberal government stays in power long enough to pass the budget allocating the money. The funds, to be distributed over 5 years, would assist up to 1000 physicians, 800 nurses and 500 other health care professionals who want to practise in Canada. A National Credential Verification Agency, run by the Medical Council of Canada, would create both a one-stop process to assess credentials and a national registry of graduates. Another \$1.3 million would help convert the council's evaluation exam into electronic form to make it more accessible. The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada would also receive \$830 000 to create a database to track all such graduates. Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh also unveiled a Web site (www.IMG-Canada.ca) to help immigrants prepare for medical licensing before they come to Canada. "Once completed, these projects will mean more doctors for Canada," Dosanjh said in Vancouver. — *Laura Eggertson, CMAJ*

Breast cancer drug: Canadian women now have a new treatment option to reduce the threat of breast cancer beyond the 5 years of tamoxifen therapy. Health Canada recently fast-tracked approval of letrozole (Femara) for the extended adjuvant treatment of hormone receptor-positive early breast cancer in postmenopausal women who have received approximately 5 years of tamoxifen therapy. The approval is based on a Canadian-led clinical

trial that, according to Health Canada, showed the drug "significantly reduced both the recurrence of breast cancer and distant metastases."

Public guardian awards: The inaugural Vanessa Awards were presented May 9 to 8 "public guardians" who demonstrated integrity and courage in the public interest at a significant personal cost." The awards (see photo) were presented to the 4 veterinary scientists fired by Health Canada for exposing the dangers of animal hormones getting into our food chain (*CMAJ* 2004;171:438); Dr. Michele Brill-Edwards, who resigned from Health Canada to expose corrupt practices and undue industry influence; Dr. Nancy Olivieri, who spoke out about patient risks during a clinical trial of a prescription drug (*CMAJ* 1998;159:955-7); and Nicholas Regush (posthumous) who broke new ground while reporting on public health. The award was established by Drug Safety Canada in memory of Vanessa Young, 15, who died in March 2000 after taking cisapride, which was contraindicated for bulimic patients (*CMAJ* 2001;165[1]:1370).

Oxycodone cases: The Ohio Supreme Court has reversed a lower court decision to grant class certification to a statewide class-action suit against Purdue Pharma, the manufacturers of the controversial painkiller oxycodone (time-released OxyContin). Purdue was accused of aggressively promoting the drug, even though it is highly addictive. Other state and federal class-action suits have likewise been denied on 9 occasions over the past 4 years. In all, 306 lawsuits, many with multiple plain-

tiffs, have been dismissed or withdrawn; 290 cases remain. "The claims made in them — that we engaged in misconduct or that individuals using our product properly were injured — simply are not true," said Howard Udell, Purdue's chief legal officer.

Hepatitis C: The federal government is extending compensation to hepatitis C victims who were infected through the tainted blood system before 1986 and after 1990. Liberals joined Opposition members in voting for Conservative MP Steven

Fletcher's motion, which will affect about 5000 people. But Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh would not say when or how people will be compensated, citing negotiations among lawyers for the government, the trust fund and victims. The government does not have immediate access to the 1986–1990 Settlement Fund, Dosanjh told Parliament. The fund belongs to the beneficiaries of the trust and is under control of the courts and not the government. In 1998, Ottawa announced a \$1.1-billion compensation package for Canadians infected between 1986 and 1990 when blood was not screened for hepatitis C.

Smoke free: Bhutan is the first country in the world to completely ban tobacco sales. Bhutan, the Himalayan kingdom between China and India, instituted the ban in December as part of King Jigme Singye Wangchuk's plan for "gross national happiness." Only about 1% of the 700 000 residents smoke. The new ban will be enforced by a \$225 fine for smoking in public, or buying or selling tobacco. — Compiled by *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

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