

News @ a glance

Open vaults: The national health care bill will top \$96 billion for the first time in 2006/07, as spending rises 5.7%, or \$5.1 billion, over the current year, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information's annual projections. Per capita provincial spending will average \$2931, led by Alberta (\$3315) and Manitoba (\$3284). Meanwhile, Quebec (\$2581) and Prince Edward Island (\$2749) will spend the least. Health care outlays by the provinces will continue to decline slightly as a proportion of total program expenditures, to 38.6% in the current year, from 38.7% in 2004/05.

Pharmacists Rx: It's official. As of Apr. 1, Alberta's 3500 pharmacists will be allowed to extend and modify existing prescriptions, and to prescribe medications for minor ailments, such as athlete's foot. The Alberta Medical Association says the legislation raises concerns about quality of care and patient safety (*CMAJ* 2006;175[5]:1463-4). Saskatchewan pharmacists are seeking similar authorities, while New Brunswick's government is now talking about an increased role for pharmacists. Ontario has also announced it will pay pharmacists for enhanced patient counselling and other professional services.

Quebec specialists: In late November, Health Minister Philippe Couillard offered Quebec specialists a 15% pay hike, an average increase of \$83 000 annually in the hope of resolving their protracted salary dispute. The specialists are asking for more than 40%, to put them on par with their Ontario counterparts.

Silicone sales: Health Canada's Therapeutic Products Directorate has lifted its 14-year partial moratorium on silicone-gel breast implants. Although an expert advisory panel has urged more study about the potential health effects of exposure to low-molecular-weight silicones should implants leak (*CMAJ* 2006;174[4]:443-4), the department said its internal review concluded there's no compelling evidence that the controversial devices cause autoimmune diseases or other systemic illnesses. Since 1992, silicone implants have only been

available under the department's special access program for medical devices, but the firms Inamed Corporation and Mentor Medical System have now been granted conditional licences to market gel-filled implants on the proviso that they report annually on an ongoing 10-year clinical trial and launch a separate multipatient study on long-term side effects. Meanwhile, Feb. 19 is the opening date for a court hearing on some 4 class action lawsuits involving the safety of an earlier generation of breast implants manufactured by Dow-Corning, in which Health Canada is accused of being remiss in its duty to ensure safety.

No if, ands or butts: Nova Scotia is the first province to eliminate point-of-sale advertising and displays for tobacco products. The new law, which Health Promotion and Protection Minister Barry Bernet calls "aggressive and progressive," bans cigarette ads and displays from stores and requires cigarettes to be placed out of sight as of March 2007. — Donalee Moulton, Halifax

Stock watch: All eyes are on the share plummeting prices of Pfizer Inc., the world's largest drugmaker after it halted clinical trials and development of torcetrapib, a cholesterol medicine designed to replace atorvastatin (Lipitor) when its patent expires. Within days of hailing the drug as "one of the most important compounds of our generation," Pfizer Inc. President Jeffrey B. Kindler discontinued work on torcetrapib after interim results from a 15 000-patient clinical trial indi-

cated more people died when they took the drug in combination with atorvastatin than those given atorvastatin alone. As of press time (Dec. 5), Pfizer stock had fallen 11%, or roughly \$21 billion.

ED emergency: Fourteen of the 17 emergency department physicians at the Saint John Regional Hospital in New Brunswick were slated to walk out on Jan. 1. Former ED physician Dr. Paul Postuma says issues include understaffing, overcrowding, and non-payment for time spent researching and teaching. The ED was designed to handle 25 000 patients per year, but in 2005-06 there were more than 63 000 visits. Health Minister Michael Murphy has guaranteed the ED won't close, but funding decisions won't be made until February. As of press time (Dec. 5) discussions between the doctors and regional health authority were ongoing. — Bobbi-Jean MacKinnon, Saint John, NB

Falsely implicated: The measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine has been unjustly tagged as a risk factor in the development of autism spectrum disorders, according to a McGill University Health Centre study (*Pediatrics* 2006;118[4]:1664-75). Earlier studies linking MMR vaccine and autism were flawed, leading to the false identification of the measles virus in the biological tissues of autistic children who had been vaccinated.

Food guide frolics: Concerns over proposed revisions to the Canadian food guide (*CMAJ* 2006;174:605-6) now have the House of Commons committee on health mulling whether to push for a full-scale review of the new guidelines, scheduled for release early this year by Health Minister Tony Clement, says Liberal MP and chiropractor Dr. Ruby Dhalla. Among recent accusations leveled during committee hearings on childhood obesity are ones to the effect that Health Canada's consultations exercise on the food guide was primarily devoted to cosmetic questions like how it should be depicted, rather than substantive scientific ones, like whether it should be advocating such a high dairy intake. — Compiled by Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*



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