

Last year, Piergiorgio Welby, who suffered from advanced muscular dystrophy, died after going on a hunger strike when police prevented his doctor from switching off his respirator. A judge rejected Welby's petition, saying that while he had a constitutional right to determine his medical treatment, Italian doctors must not carry out treatments "aimed at causing death." — Mary Helen Spooner, London, England

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Direct v. indirect euthanasia

Direct active euthanasia involves specific actions to cause a patient's death, such as administering an overdose of drugs. This practice is illegal in most countries, including Switzerland. Indirect active euthanasia involves giving the patient a palliative, such as a strong sedative, which could lead to death. This is allowed in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium. Passive euthanasia is defined as withdrawing life support or other medical treatment, often at the patient's request, and is legal in many countries. Assisted suicide is defined as providing patients with the means to end their own lives, but not directly administered by doctors.

FOR THE RECORD

Serving up progress

The United States is making significant progress in its goal to better protect its food supply, according to a report from the US Food and Drug Administration (www.fda.gov/oc/initiatives/advance/food/progressreport1108.html).

The report, which evaluates progress in implementing the Food Protection Plan, notes successful measures in 2008 included the irradiation of lettuce to reduce *E. coli*; genetic analysis of new *Salmonella* strains; improved methods of detecting melamine; rapid detection of *C. botulinum*, *E. coli* and *Salmonella* in food-processing plants; and the signing of an agreement between 6 states to form a rapid response team to "develop, implement, exercise and integrate response" to foodborne illness.

Food quality and safety standards in Canada, enforced by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, differ substantially from US regulations. For example, food inspectors visit and assess meat processing plants 3 times a week in Canada, as opposed to daily in the US.

"Canadian standards are not as prescriptive as the US for plant evaluations, and therefore results in less frequent visitations," says Marc Richard, a Canadian Food Inspection Agency spokesman.

While the United States is highlighting its success in food protection, the memory of the recent listeriosis outbreak in Canada — and its death toll of 20 — is fresh in the minds of Canadians (*CMAJ* 2008;179[9]:877-9). A probe into the out-



The United States is making significant progress in protecting its food supply, a recent report indicates.

break, commissioned by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, is due early in 2008. — David Manly, Ottawa, Ont.

Healthy competition

Public drug plans, businesses and individuals could enjoy annual savings of up to \$800 million if there were more competition in the generic drug market, according to a federal Competition Bureau report.

The bulk of potential savings — up to \$600 million — would be reaped by businesses, private drug plans and individuals who pay out of pocket. Public plans could also cut costs by about \$200 million annually. Potential savings will increase as more drugs come off patent, according to the report, which outlines strategies for increasing competition.

An earlier report from the bureau

found that although there is generic drug competition in Canada at the pharmacy level, savings from rebates and allowances were not being passed on to customers. — Ann Silversides, *CMAJ*

Slight decrease in HIV and AIDS rates

The number of new positive HIV test reports dropped 5% in 2007 compared to 2006, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada's year-end booklet, *HIV and AIDS in Canada*.

The exact cause of the 5% decrease is not clear, stated agency spokesman Michael Tansey in an email. Small fluctuations can be caused by a number of factors, he noted, "such as an increase or decrease in reporting, an increase or decrease in HIV testing, and an increase or decrease in underlying infection rates."

Due to changes in data collection procedures, immigration rules and testing policies, fewer positive cases were reported among women and people from HIV-endemic countries.

Of the 2432 new cases, 41.3% were among men who have sex with men. Increased infection rates were observed among young women practising unsafe sex and Aboriginal intravenous drug users. Since 1985, almost 65 000 cases of HIV/AIDS have been documented by the Agency. — Lesley Ananny, Ottawa, Ont.

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