

## Briefly

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**Stem cell charter:** The Canadian Stem Cell Foundation unveiled a voluntary code of ethics for stem cell research. Released at the World Stem Cell Summit in Baltimore, Maryland, along with a “Rock Star Scientists” video, the Stem Cell Charter urges research that is conducted on five principles: “responsible science, protection of citizens, intellectual freedom, transparency and integrity,” ([stemcellcharter.org](http://stemcellcharter.org)).

**Dementia:** The number of people living with Alzheimer and dementia will double annually every 20 years, from a current level of 35 million to 65.7 million in 2030 and 115.4 million in 2050, according to the *2009 World Alzheimer Report* from Alzheimer’s Disease International ([www.alz.org/national/documents/report\\_summary\\_2009worldalzheimerreport.pdf](http://www.alz.org/national/documents/report_summary_2009worldalzheimerreport.pdf)). The report urges that the World Health Organization declare dementia a “world health priority” and that countries “develop national strategies to provide services and support for people with dementia and their families.”

**Sleeping sickness:** The Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative has unveiled the first new treatment in 25 years for human African trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness), which threatens an estimated 60 million people in 36 countries across sub-Saharan Africa. Not only is nifurtimox-eflornithine combination therapy “more adapted to patient needs in remote areas, but it also cuts the cost of drugs, hospitalization and transport,” Dr. Bernard Pecoul, executive-director of the initiative, said at the International Scientific Council for Trypanosomiasis Research and Control in Kampala, Uganda.

**Zinc deficiency:** The International Zinc Association, UNICEF, several governments, the Micronutrient Initiative and other donor agencies have unveiled a US\$1.8-million, three-year

plan to redress zinc deficiency in several developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. An estimated 450 000 children and 350 000 adults die annually as a result of zinc deficiency. The initiative will see 150 000 tonnes of zinc-fortified fertilizer used in crop production within the targeted countries.

**Tentative contract:** The New Brunswick Medical Society has reached a tentative settlement with its provincial government regarding a dispute over the freezing of physicians’ wages. The medical society had threatened legal action against the province, which had proposed to freeze doctors’ wages for two years. On Sept. 22, however, the two parties released a joint statement stating that they were “encouraged by what has been achieved since a decision was made to adjourn the Sept. 16 court hearing date.” The province’s doctors had been seeking a 3.75% annual increase over four years. The New Brunswick government refused to sign the contract, citing a poor economy, and introduced legislation that would allow it to enforce the freeze. Details about the new settlement will not be released until the deal is finalized.

**Hear this:** The European Union will craft new technical standards to limit the volume of digital music players in a bid to preserve the hearing of users. A European Union scientific advisory body concluded that listening to MP3 players such as iPods at levels higher than 80 decibels for an hour a day for five years could result in hearing loss. The committee urged maximum volume level of 80 decibels for exposure under 40 hours per week or 89 decibels adjusted for exposure under five hours a week (<http://ec.europa.eu/health/opinions/en/hearing-loss-personal-music-player-mp3/index.htm>).

**No handshakes:** Soccer-playing youngsters in Edmonton, Alberta, will be prohibited from shaking hands with foes

after their games in a bid to prevent the spread of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 flu virus. The directive issued by the Edmonton Minor Soccer Association states that “due to H1N1 and other viruses, at the end of all EMSA games players will not shake hands, both teams will stand in front of each other and cheer/clap for the other team, immediately after they will advance to their respective dressing rooms. This {applies} to all competitions and all genders and age groups.” Among other measures urged by the association was that players “do not share water bottles, drinking glasses, mouth guards or eating utensils.”

**Competence complaints:** Male physicians in the United Kingdom, particularly those over 50, and doctors trained abroad are far more likely to have complaints about competence lodged against them than their younger counterparts, according to an analysis conducted by the National Clinical Assessment Service ([www.ncas.npsa.nhs.uk/resources/publications/caseworkanalyses](http://www.ncas.npsa.nhs.uk/resources/publications/caseworkanalyses)). The referral rate for doctors over 50 is five times that of doctors under 40. Women doctors are two thirds less likely to be referred for a skills investigation.

**Antiretroviral therapy:** Roughly 42% of the estimated 9.5 million people living in low- and middle-income nations who needed antiretroviral therapy had access to the treatment in 2008, an increase of 9% over 2007, according to a report by the World Health Organization, UNICEF and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. The progress report on HIV/AIDS indicated that access improved because “the cost of most first-line regimens decreased by 10%–40% between 2006 and 2008” ([www.who.int/hiv/pub/2009progressreport/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/2009progressreport/en/index.html)).

**Nobel prize:** Three researchers from the United States won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for their work on how chromosomes can be copied. The researchers — Elizabeth Blackburn,

Carol Greider and Jack Szostak — are credited with furthering understanding of human ageing, cancer and stem cells. Blackburn and Szostak discovered a unique DNA sequence that protects chromosomes from degrading. Greider and Blackburn later discovered an enzyme called telomerase, which is involved in the copying of chromosomes. The Nobel Assembly has said that the researchers' work has "added a new dimension to our understanding of the cell, shed light on disease mechanisms, and stimulated the development of potential new therapies."

**Financial woes:** The United Kingdom's National Health Service (NHS) may

soon be facing immense financial pressure, and senior officials have set aggressive targets to save money. These targets include reducing the number of patients referred to specialists and asking general practitioners to spend less time in consultations. The financial challenges are so great, in large part due to increase demand for health services from an ageing population, that hospital closures and job cuts seem inevitable.

**Smart drugs:** University students might one day have to urinate into cups before taking midterms, some academics claim. While experts are divided on the use of cognition-enhancing or "smart" drugs — some claim it's a positive develop-

ment while others say there are health and social risks — there appears little argument over whether their use is becoming more widespread. For instance, the use of methylphenidate and amphetamines to boost test scores is somewhere around 25% at some universities in the United States, according to a recent paper in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*. Unless schools find effective ways to test for these drugs, students who don't take them may be at a disadvantage, claims author Vince Cakic, a psychology professor at the University of Sydney, Australia. — Roger Collier and Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

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