

Briefly

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FDA approves flu vaccine: The United States Food and Drug Administration has approved a seasonal vaccine for the 2010-11 flu season. The trivalent vaccine contains antigens for three flu strains: A/California/7/2009 (H1N1)-like, A/Perth/16/2009 (H3N2)-like, and B/Brisbane/60/2008 (www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm220718.htm). In the coming flu season, as per recommendations from the Center for Disease Control's Advisory committee on Immunization Practices, the US will begin to expand the ambit of its vaccination campaigns to include all people aged 6 months and older. In previous years, campaigns focused on people with underlying health conditions, children 6 months through 18 years of age and people in close contact with high-risk persons. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Pandemic over: World Health Organization Director General Dr. Margaret Chan has announced that the agency's emergency committee has declared an end to the pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza outbreak, which was estimated to have killed more than 18 500 people worldwide. "As we enter the post-pandemic period, this does not mean that the H1N1 virus has gone away. Based on experience with past pandemics, we expect the H1N1 virus to take on the behaviour of a seasonal influenza virus and continue to circulate for some years to come," Chan told reporters (www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2010/h1n1_vpc_20100810/en/index.html). The Public Health Agency of Canada has reported 426 pandemic (H1N1) 2009-related deaths across the country. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

McGill scuttles MCAT: Concerns that the Medical College Admission Test bias against Francophone applicants has prompted McGill University

in Montréal, Quebec, to discontinue a requirement for the MCAT for Canadians seeking entry to its medical school, (www.mcgill.ca/medicine/admissions/criteria/med-r-reqs/#MCAT). Dr. Saleem Razack, assistant dean of admissions for medicine at McGill, told the *Montreal Gazette* that the requirement would have been kept had there been a French equivalent. McGill joins all Francophone medical schools in Quebec, the University of Ottawa in Ontario and the Northern Ontario School of Medicine in Sudbury, Ontario in eliminating the MCAT requirement for domestic applicants. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Natural death on the rise in UK prison system: Poor diet and health care are behind the "rising trend" of natural deaths within the United Kingdom's prison system, according to a report by the Prison and Probation Ombudsman for England and Wales (www.ppo.gov.uk/docs/14276_301425-PPO-Annual-Report.pdf). About 80 prisoners have died from natural causes each year since 2004. In 2009, the number of deaths due to natural causes spiked at 116, an increase that can't be accounted for by changes in the prison population or age of inmates, according to the report. It also found the average age of those who die of natural causes in prison is much lower than the national average. In the UK, the average age at death is 78 years for men and 81 for women, while the average for male and female prisoners is 56 and 47, respectively. The most common cause of natural death among prisoners is heart disease, followed by cancer. The report said that "prisoners' symptoms have not been acted upon quickly and potential opportunities to save lives have been missed." Although close attention is paid to rates of suicide and self-harm within the prison system, the report stated "the same focus is not always given to prisoners who die from natural causes" and called for further investigation. — Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

Free milk program won't face cut-backs: The British government has retreated from a controversial plan to scrap free milk for schoolchildren under age five. Introduced in the 1940s, the free milk program has doubled in cost in the last five years, now setting the country back some £50 million annually, according to junior health minister Anne Milton in recent correspondence with Scottish health officials. But despite hints that massive cuts are forthcoming as the government moves to offset a record national deficit, slashing the milk program was politically unsaleable because of its perceived impact on children's welfare; evidence of which there is none, according to Milton. Still, it was feared the cuts would remind voters of the "Thatcher the Milk Snatcher" debacle of previous years, when former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher earned the nickname for withdrawing free milk for children over age seven as education minister in the 1970s. The health department had been promised budget protection in the nation's upcoming fall spending review, but Prime Minister David Cameron recently warned Britons that some "genuinely valued" public programs "will have to go." — Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

International training: Foreign-born and trained doctors provide higher-quality care than American-born doctors, whether trained domestically or internationally, according to an analysis conducted by a team headed by Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research President Dr. John Norcini. The patients of foreign-born graduates of international medical schools "had significantly lower mortality rates than patients cared for by doctors who graduated from U.S. medical schools or who were U.S. citizens and received their degrees abroad," according to the study (*Health Affairs* 2010;29[8]:1461-68). The death rate of patients with congestive heart failure or

acute myocardial infarction treated by foreign-born international graduates was 5%, as compared with 5.5% for American born-and-trained doctors and 5.8% for American-born doctors who were trained overseas. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Frozen rodents: The United States Food and Drug Administration says people who purchased frozen mice, rats and chicks from Biggers and Callahan LLC, dba/MiceDirect.com, to feed to their reptiles are at risk of being contaminated with salmonella. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that as of Aug. 2, some 34 people in 17 states became ill as a result of handling frozen rodents purchased from the firm. “After handling either frozen rodents used as reptile food or the reptiles, individuals should thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water and use a disinfectant to thoroughly clean any surfaces that have been in contact with frozen rodents,” the FDA said in a release (www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm221735.htm). — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Tropical fungus: The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that a tropical fungus that has now become endemic in British Columbia, *Cryptococcus gattii*, has spread through the Pacific Northwest and killed nine people between 2005 and July. The CDC notes that 218 cases of *C. gattii* infection had been reported to the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control through the year 2007. “Physicians should consider *C. gattii* as a possible etiology of a cryptococcal infection among persons living in or traveling to the Pacific Northwest or traveling to other *C. gattii*-endemic areas,” states the CDC report (www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/wk/mm5928.pdf). — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Indigenous health curriculum: The Indigenous Physician Association of Canada and the Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada have released a pair of tools to help medical faculties ascertain whether they are being sensitive to First Nations, Inuit and Metis concerns in the training of undergradu-

ates. It includes a curriculum implementation toolkit (www.ipac-amic.org/docs/IPAC-AFMC%20FN-I-M%20Health%20Curriculum%20Implementation%20Toolkit_Eng.pdf), as well as a critical reflection tool featuring a checklist of questions that schools should ask in the development of curricula, such as “what local protocols do you need to observe in order to be respectful of proper customs? (i.e., Are there certain offerings, like tobacco, you should be making? Are there certain community members whom you should approach first like Chief and Council or Elders?)” (www.ipac-amic.org/docs/IPAC-AFMC%20FN-I-M%20Health%20Critical%20Reflection%20Tool_Eng.pdf). — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

The Drug-Alizer: Health Canada has launched a not4me Facebook® Fanpage as part of its youth drug prevention campaign, complete with “drug quick facts” and testimonies from teenagers about the detrimental impact drug use had on themselves or their families (www.facebook.com/drugsnot4me). The site also features an interactive quiz and “The Drug-Alizer,” an application that “visually shows the harmful effects on the body over an extended period of time” (www.facebook.com/drugsnot4me#!/drugsnot4me?v=app_7146470109). “Health Canada is excited to be launching its first Facebook® page, this one aimed at youth aged 13 to 15 as part of its ‘Drugs not4me’ campaign,” said Health Minister Leona Aglukkag in a press release (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/media/nr-cp/_2010/2010_141-eng.php). “It is important for our Government to connect with youth and provide them with a venue where they can share their thoughts on the harmful effects of illicit drug use.” — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Former CMA president to become delegate to WMA: Canadian Medical Association past president Dr. Robert Ouellet will become the association’s official delegate to the World Medical Association. Ouellet will replace Dr. Ruth Collins-Nakai as the CMA’s delegate and assume a two-year stint with the world organization at the end of 2010. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Membership fees: The annual membership fee for the Canadian Medical Association will rise \$20 to \$420 per year, commencing in 2011. The increase was approved by 82% of delegates at the CMA’s 143rd annual general meeting in Niagara Falls, Ontario. The sole concern raised was by former CMA President (1984–85) Dr. Alex McPherson, who inquired as to the amount of the overall fee that is allocated in support of *CMAJ* and who earlier at the gathering argued that the journal should be wound down. Roughly 11% of the membership fee goes to CMA Publications and a portion of that (about \$12) goes in support of *CMAJ*. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Cost of medical errors: The United States Society of Actuaries says measurable medical errors cost the American economy \$US19.5 billion in 2008, while killing 2500 people, causing 1.5 million medical injuries and resulting in more than 10 million days of work to be missed. The study, *The Economic Measurement of Medical Errors*, indicated that roughly 55% of the cost was associated with “five common errors: pressure ulcers; postoperative infections; mechanical complications of devices, implants or grafts; post-laminectomy syndrome; and hemorrhages complicating a procedure” (www.soa.org/files/pdf/research-econ-measurement.pdf). — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

Berkeley retreat: The University of California, Berkeley has retreated from its plan to conduct voluntary genetic testing of first-year students on their ability to absorb folic acid, to tolerate alcohol, and to metabolize lactose. The plan, Bring Your Genes to Cal, had been intended as a conversation starter (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3286). The university said the retreat was “necessitated because the California Department of Public Health insisted that since students would have been given access to their own test results, the academic exercise was not exempt from laws designed to assure the accuracy and quality of diagnostic tests used in providing medical care to patients” (www

.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2010/08/12_dna_change.shtml).

Fewer flu deaths: The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have lowered its estimate of how many people die during flu seasons. The previ-

ous estimate, 36 000 deaths, was based on information from the years 1990–1999. During this time, the H3N2 strain of flu, which is more deadly than the H1N1 or B strains, was more prevalent. The new estimate, 24 000 deaths, is based on data

from 1976–2007. The highest number of deaths attribute to flu during this period was 48 614, in 2003–04. The lowest number of deaths was 3349, in 1986–87.

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