

## Briefly

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**Health card barcodes:** Quebec health insurance cards will soon feature barcodes as part of a bid to prevent fraud, the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec has announced (<http://communiqués.gouv.qc.ca/gouvqc/communiqués/GPQF/Decembre2009/17/c4100.html>). The new cards will be phased in over a four-year period. — Sabrina Doyle, Ottawa, Ont.

**Executive compensation:** Canada's highest paid chief executive officers earned an average \$7.35 million in 2008, according to a report, *Soft Landing: Recession and Canada's 100 Highest Paid CEOs*, from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives ([www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/reports/docs/Soft\\_Landing\\_Recession\\_and\\_CEOs.pdf](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/reports/docs/Soft_Landing_Recession_and_CEOs.pdf)). By contrast, the average Canadian income was \$42 305. Among the top 100 earners was Michael McCain, who earned \$4.44 million at Maple Leaf Foods Inc., whose Bartor Road facility in North York, Ontario, was linked to a listeriosis outbreak that led to 12 deaths.

**British bar bill:** The cost of treating alcohol-related conditions doubled for the United Kingdom's National Health Service between 2001 and 2007, soaring to £2.7 billion, according to a report by the NHS Confederation, a health-care providers organization, and the Royal College of Physicians ([www.nhsconfed.org/Publications/Documents/Briefing\\_193\\_Alcohol\\_costs\\_the\\_NHS.pdf](http://www.nhsconfed.org/Publications/Documents/Briefing_193_Alcohol_costs_the_NHS.pdf)). The report states that British consumption of alcohol rose by 19% over the previous three decades to now top all its European counterparts. Some 10.5 million Britons do not drink within "sensible" limits, while 1.1 million have a form of alcohol addiction. "We hope this report helps to outline the scale of the problems facing the NHS and acts as a warning that if we

carry on drinking in the way that we are currently, the bar bill will be paid in worse health and a health system struggling to cope," stated NHS Confederation Chief Executive Steve Barnett in a press release.

**Vaccine loan:** Federal Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq announced on Jan. 6 that Canada will ship five million doses of pandemic H1N1 (2009) flu vaccine to Mexico to help the Central American nation meet its vaccine demands. Mexico will be expected to replace the doses by March 31. "Canada's provinces and territories have been instrumental in facilitating a quick response to Mexico's request," stated Dr. David Butler-Jones, Canada's chief public health officer, in a press release. "Canada's commitment to support global efforts to respond to H1N1 pandemic is possible through our ongoing collaboration with our provincial partners."

**Colon cancer screening:** Roughly 56% of Canadians between the ages of 50 and 74 have not received fecal occult blood tests within the previous two years, according to a survey commissioned by the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer's National Colorectal Cancer Screening Network. Nearly 70% of the 3153 Canadians surveyed indicated they had not had a conversation with their doctor about getting screened for colon cancer.

**Premature babies:** Nearly 11 million of the 12.9 million premature babies born each year worldwide are born in Africa and Asia, according to the World Health Organization ([www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/88/1/08-062554.pdf](http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/88/1/08-062554.pdf)). The world's first attempt to quantify the global incidence of preterm birth also indicated that the highest rates are in Africa (11.9%) and North America (10.6%). The lowest rate is in Europe (6.2%).

**Doctor-assisted suicide:** The state of Montana has become the third in the

United States to allow physician-assisted suicide after the Montana Supreme Court ruled that it wasn't an illegal practice (<http://fnweb1.isd.doa.state.mt.us/idmws/docContent.dll?Library=CISDO CSVR01^doaisd510&ID=003824347>).

A physician who aids someone in dying "reflects legislative respect for the wishes of a patient facing incurable illness," the court stated. But in their narrow 4–3 decision, the judges dodged the question of whether physician-assisted suicide is a guaranteed right, saying that was a matter for the state legislature.

**Reducing drug costs:** The United Kingdom's Department of Health has unveiled a proposal to save the National Health Service (NHS) £20 million a year by allowing generic substitution of physician's prescriptions for branded medicines ([www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_110511.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_110511.pdf)). Roughly 83% of the NHS annual drug bill of more than £10 billion is now filled using generic drugs, and the department hopes to increase that by 5%. "Introducing generic medicine substitution will deliver value for money and savings to the NHS which will go directly back into health services, ultimately benefiting patients and improving the care they receive," Health Minister Mike O'Brien said in a press release.

**FDA Transparency:** As part of its bid to dispel the notions that it only rarely acted in the public interest and occasionally sacrificed patient safety in the interests of industry confidentiality, the United States Food and Drug Administration on Jan. 13 launched the first phase of its ballyhooed "transparency initiative." The first phase involved the unveiling of a web-based curriculum that describes the agency and its regulatory responsibilities ([www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/WhatWeDo/FDATransparencyTaskForce/default.htm](http://www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/WhatWeDo/FDATransparencyTaskForce/default.htm)). Still to come are promised measures to

enhance transparency of FDA decision-making processes.

**CMA vote:** Balloting began Jan. 14 in Newfoundland and Labrador to choose the Canadian Medical Association's president-elect for 2010–11. The four candidates for the post are current Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association President and orthopedic surgeon Dr. Brendan Lewis, as well as former presidents Dr. John Haggie, Dr. Lydia Hatcher and Dr. Susan King. Haggie is a general surgeon, while Hatcher and King are family physicians. Voting closes on Feb. 25.

**Deceleration:** Overall United States health spending increased by 4.4% to US\$2.3 trillion, or US\$7681 per person, in 2008, according to a report by the US Department of Health and Human Services. The overall 4.4% growth rate is the lowest in 48 years, but a breakdown of health care outlays indicated that spending increases varied significantly by sector. They rose 4.7% to US\$496.2 billion for doctors' services, 4.5% to US\$718.4 billion for hospital care, and 3.2% to US\$234 billion for retail prescription drug sales (<http://content.healthaffairs.org/cgi/rep rint/29/1/147>). Spending on Medicare rose 8.6% to US\$469 billion. The share of the US gross domestic product devoted to health care rose to 16.2% from 15.9%.

**Insite ruling:** The British Columbia Court of Appeal has rebuffed another federal attempt to close down the Vancouver-based Insite safe injection site, upholding a lower court's decision that the supervision of drug injection falls within provincial powers under the Constitution Act of 1867 ([www.courts.gov.bc.ca/jdb-txt/CA/10/00/2010BCCA0015.htm](http://www.courts.gov.bc.ca/jdb-txt/CA/10/00/2010BCCA0015.htm)). In a split 2–1 decision, Justice Carol Huddart said the safe injection site is a health facility, and therefore, falls under provincial jurisdiction. "Like palliative care, it is a form of harm reduc-

tion with benefits for both the patient and the community. The lure of safe injection gets those addicts into Insite so health care may be delivered." The federal government has long argued that Insite required exemptions from federal drug trafficking and possession law to remain operational.

**Swimming in dollars:** A national survey conducted by six health organizations, including the Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada and the advocacy group Research Canada, An Alliance for Health Discovery, concludes that Canadians believe that 20.7 cents, rather than one cent, out of every dollar spent on health care should be spent on research, while 65% would be willing to shell out \$1 more per week out of their own pockets to fund research ([www.canadaspeaks2010.ca/content.php?sec=3](http://www.canadaspeaks2010.ca/content.php?sec=3)). But the poll also indicates that Canadians believe that improving access to health services, patient safety and controlling the cost of health care rank ahead of research as a national priority. The poll, conducted by Angus Reid Strategies, has a margin of error of +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20.

**Enshrining principles:** The government of Alberta should introduce legislation to govern how the province's health care system operates, as well as pass a patient charter of rights, a blue-ribbon committee urges. "The Alberta health act should address the much broader range of health services within the province, both those that receive public funding and others within the overall continuum of services that enable healthy people and communities," the advisory committee on health, which was established by former health minister Ron Liepert to reform health care legislation, urged in its Jan. 20 report ([www.ministersadvisorycommitteeonhealth.ca/documents/MACH-Final-Report-2010-01-20.pdf](http://www.ministersadvisorycommitteeonhealth.ca/documents/MACH-Final-Report-2010-01-20.pdf)).

**Squires award:** Winnipeg, Manitoba,

gastroenterologist Dr. Laura E. Targownik and researchers Lisa M. Lix, Colleen J. Metge, Heather J. Prior, Stella Leung and Dr. William D. Leslie have been named recipients of the 2008 Bruce Squires Award from *CMAJ*. Their study, entitled "Use of Proton Pump Inhibitors and Risk of Osteoporosis-Related Fractures" (*CMAJ* 2008. DOI:10.1502/cmaj.109-0002), "demonstrated a novel association, one which will lead researchers to further explore the risk of proton pump inhibitors," says *CMAJ* Editor-in-Chief Dr. Paul Hébert. "Highlighting clinically important risk of medications is exactly the type of research that is deserving of the Squires Award," he adds. The award honours Editor Emeritus Dr. Bruce Squires, who served in various capacities at *CMAJ* from 1984 to 1996, including editor-in-chief for seven years.

**Seven steps:** The American Heart Association has unveiled guidelines for "ideal cardiovascular health" as defined by seven health measures. Dubbed "Life's Simple 7," the guidelines were released along with an online assessment tool, My Life Check, which allows people to test where they are along the spectrum of cardiovascular health (<http://mylifecheck.heart.org/>). The seven health measures are: never smoked or quit more than one year ago; body mass index less than 24 kg/m<sup>2</sup>; physical activity of at least 150 minutes (moderate intensity) or 75 minutes (vigorous intensity) each week; meeting four to five of the association's dietary recommendations, which includes such things as eating one half cup of fruit and vegetables daily and eating oily fish two or more times per week; total cholesterol of less than 5.18 mmol/L; blood pressure below 120/80 mmHg; and fasting blood glucose less than 5.6 mmol/L (*Circulation* 2010. DOI:10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.109.192703).

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