Briefly

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Timely access: California will become the first state in the United States to oblige health maintenance organizations to schedule appointments for patients within specified time frames (www.healthhelp.ca.gov/aboutthedmh/gen/gen_ann.aspx). Commencing in 2011, doctors must treat patients within 10 business days of their having requested an appointment. Specialists will be given 15 days. Doctors' offices must respond to telephone calls within 30 minutes. There is a bit of wiggle room in the regulations, though, as doctors can delay treatment if they feel that will "not have a detrimental impact on the health of the enrollee."

Bed closure retreat: Recently appointed Alberta Health Minister Gene Zwozdesky has beat a fast retreat on previously announced government plans to close hospital beds. Zwozdesky put on hold plans to move 246 beds at the province's largest mental health facility into the community (CMAJ 2009. DOI:10.1503/cmaj.109-3060), and to close 290 beds in Edmonton and Calgary in the next three years. Zwozdesky indicated he's hopeful the Feb. 9 provincial budget will make monies available to keep the beds permanently open.

Squeezing profits: Drug prices for 416 brand-name drug products increased by 100% to 499% between 2000 and 2008 as manufacturers and wholesalers sought to bolster profits for drugs which had few, if any, market competitors, according to the United States Government Accountability Office. The report, *Brand-Name Prescription Drug Pricing*, also indicates that over half of those drugs fell within three therapeutic classes: central nervous system, anti-infective and cardiovascular (www.gao.gov/new.items/d10201.pdf).

Sobriety story: Doctors, rather than police, should oversee inmates of Russian prison holding cells for the inebriated (commonly known as "drunk tanks" in many nations), First Deputy Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation Alexander Buksman says. *The Moscow Times* reports that Buksman told a Russian Association of Jurists that "police should just have to deliver the drunks and maintain order at the cells. The rest should be done by medical professionals, like everywhere else in the civilized world." Buksman urged the changes in the midst of a controversy over a journalist who was beaten to death and shot in the genitals earlier in January while in a Russian drunk tank.

510(k) cleared medical devices: The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) will conduct public hearings on the 510(k) clearance process for medical devices (www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm198479.htm). The 510(k) process basically allows manufacturers to get products on the market without formal FDA approval by declaring that they are a "predicate" device, i.e., similar to a product that's already approved. Critics have charged that the process is now regularly abused and has already commissioned a \$US1.3-million study from the US Institute of Medicine as to whether the system needs an overhaul.

Strictly sandwiches: The state of New York has joined a growing list of governments and organizations calling for restrictions on drug industry gifts to physicians. In unveiling his budget for fiscal year 2010/11, Governor David Paterson called for prohibitions on such largesse as taking docs to restaurants, sporting events, dramatic productions or jaunts to vacation hotspots, (http://publications.budget.state.ny.us/eBudget1011/fy1011artVIIbills/HMH_ArticleVII.pdf). Cash, of course,

would also be verboten. Among the few remaining goodies that a pharmaceutical rep could offer would be modest lunches in a doctor's office or a hospital setting, but only while making a presentation.

Mediocre grades: Canada continues to be out-innovated by its Western peers and now ranks 14th out of 17 nations in its capacity to convert knowledge into goods and services, according to the Conference Board of Canada's latest report card on innovation, *How Canada Performs* (www.conferenceboard.ca/HCP/Details/Innovation.aspx). Overall, Canada received a "D" grade with respect to 12 indicators of innovation and trailed behind leaders Switzerland, Ireland, the United States and Sweden. The report also indicates that Canada has arrested its slide in the production of scientific articles. Canada had consistently rated a "B" grade for scientific articles in the 1990s, but slid to a "C" in the early 2000s. But while the number of articles per million population rose to 844 in 2007 from 835 in 2006, Canada's overall grade for the decade remained a "C" in comparison to its peers. In Switzerland, for example, scientific article output in 2007 was 1217 per million, while in Sweden, it was 1084.

Decade of vaccines: In the single largest charitable donation in history, Bill and Melinda Gates announced at the World Economic Forum's Jan. 29 annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, that their foundation will spend US\$10 billion over the next decade to research, develop and deliver vaccines, including ones for pneumonia and diarrhea, two of the leading causes of global child death. "We must make this the decade of vaccines," Gates said in a press release. "Vaccines already save and improve millions of lives in developing countries. Innovation will make it possible to save more children than ever before."

No deal: Quebec Health Minister Yves Bolduc has rejected requests from orthopedic surgeons that they be paid for volunteering their services in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti. The surgeons

had sought between \$700 and \$800 per day on the grounds that police officers and firefighters were receiving similar monies from the government for their efforts in Haiti. But Bolduc said there

was a difference between volunteering services and being sent abroad by the province. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

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