



EUTYCHUS

Two-faced on tobacco

Antismoking groups and doctors' leaders have attacked the government for delaying the introduction of a ban on tobacco advertising, after the Tobacco Bill was excluded from the Queen's speech, thereby meaning no legislation for at least 18 months (*BMJ* 2001; 322:1564, 30 June). The reluctance to make the ban a priority may well reflect personal vested interest in both parties. The unsuccessful Conservative leadership candidate Kenneth Clarke has admitted to profiting to the tune of £100,000 pa through his involvement in British American Tobacco (BAT). By contrast, *BMJ* editor Richard Smith and East Midlands MEP Mel Read, have recently resigned academic appointments at Nottingham University after the institution accepted a £3.8m grant from the same company. (*BMJ* 2001; 322:1506, 23 June)

Abortion in Ireland

The Family Planning Association in Northern Ireland has been granted a judicial review of medical practices in the province relating to abortion, which they say is aimed at getting the Northern Ireland Health Minister 'to issue best practice guidelines for the medical profession and advice for women on the services available'. Abortion is still illegal in Northern Ireland as the 1967 Abortion Act does not apply there. The move follows a furore in the Medical Council of Ireland after a council meeting to relax the country's abortion law. Decisions are expected on both issues in September. (*BMJ* 2001; 323:1507, 23 June)

Slippery slopes to designer babies

Scientists at the Reproductive Genetics Institute in Chicago, who last year controversially selected an embryo to provide a bone marrow donor sibling for a child with Fanconi's anaemia, are now extending the technique to prevent the birth of babies with a predisposition to cancer. A New York couple affected by the Li-Fraumeni syndrome, which due to a mutation in a tumour-suppressing gene p53 predisposes sufferers to a 50% risk of cancer by age 30, recently had treatment. The move has raised fears about a slippery slope to designer babies driven by parents' desires to give birth to 'normal' children at any cost. (*BMJ* 2001; 322:1505, 23 June)

Further folic foot-dragging

The incidence of neural tube defects such as anencephaly and spina bifida has fallen by 20% in the US following the mandatory addition of folic acid to pasta and bread in 1998. But the UK government is still 'waiting a final decision from the health minister' despite all the relevant committees having recommended that the UK should also fortify flour with folic acid. Professor Wald, of the Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine in London, who strongly supports the move says, 'I don't know why there is a delay in implementing such a policy'. Current policy of advising women to take folic acid is not working. (*BMJ* 2001; 322:1510, 23 June)

Chinese profit from organs

Harvesting of organs for transplant from executed prisoners in China is still continuing apace according to evidence given by a Chinese doctor to the US subcommittee on International Relations and Human Rights. Committee chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen said that China had 'found a lucrative industry in the field of organ transplantation, which not only yields great financial rewards, but provides the regime with a powerful tool to coerce and intimidate the population'. (*BMJ* 2001; 323:69, 14 July)

Bush fights back on abortion

The Bush administration has drafted a new policy that would allow American States to define 'an unborn child' as a person and thus make it eligible for medical insurance coverage (*BMJ* 2001; 323:66, 14 July). The US House of Representatives earlier voted by 218 to 210 to ratify President Bush's ban on taxpayers' funds going to overseas groups that perform or promote abortions (*BMJ* 2001; 322:1324, 2 June). There are currently about 1.5 million abortions per year in the US.

The price of 'love'

Up to ten billion condoms are now used worldwide each year, but despite this the global number of sexually transmitted infections is estimated to be in excess of 150 million, in addition to about 50 million abortions. 36 million people worldwide now live with HIV or AIDS, of whom 90% live in developing countries. (*BMJ* 2001; 322:1253, 19 May)

Saved Sex?

In response to the upward trend in sexually transmitted diseases since 1995 the UK government plans to spend £47.5 million in the next two years on a national strategy for sexual health and HIV promoting 'safe sex'. The strategy focuses on 'integrated care', 'one-stop shops' and targeted access to information. It seems unlikely that promotion of sexual abstinence before marriage and faithfulness within marriage will play a prominent role (*BMJ* 2001; 323:250, 4 August). 'Safe sex' clearly isn't safe enough. 'Saved sex' - sex saved for marriage - would seem a better option.

Mixed messages on cloning

The Royal Society has called for an international moratorium on reproductive cloning on the grounds of the technique's low success rate (1% in animals) and the fact that the great majority of successfully cloned embryos develop abnormally. But it has reconfirmed its support for the continuation of research involving therapeutic cloning, the production of cloned embryos for research, despite recent work showing promising results with adult stem cells. (*BMJ* 2001; 322:1566, 30 June)