

Skin cells to brain cells?

With dementia and degenerative neurological diseases driving demand for euthanasia and assisted suicide, encouraging research has shown that 20% of skin cells from mice tails could be reprogrammed into neural cells. Lead researcher Marius Wernig described their surprising success as 'one of those high-risk, high-reward projects'. If this research could be repeated in humans, there are claims it could lead to treatments for conditions like Alzheimer dementia and for Parkinson's disease. (David Derbyshire, *Daily Mail* 28 January 2010. tinyurl.com/y9wyfm5)

Embryos destroyed for 'minor' disorders

If such research saves embryos, the Human Fertilisation Embryology Authority has triggered a new row about 'designer babies' by permitting destruction during PGD without further HFEA consent of embryos with 116 inherited conditions. Some of these present late in life after decades have been enjoyed, others are not life-threatening or can readily be treated. Pete Sampras has a version of the thalassaemia trait yet has won 14 Grand Slams, and historic Marfan's sufferers are thought to include Rachmaninoff, Charles de Gaulle, and Abraham Lincoln. (Lois Rogers, *Sunday Times* 24 January 2010. tinyurl.com/ydxnklj)

Protecting children

CMF member Janice Allister who chairs the RCGP's Primary Care Child Safeguarding Forum has announced the updated *Safeguarding Children and Young People Toolkit*. This arose from a joint RCGP/NSPCC collection of educational tools disseminated to all GPs, stimulated partly by Lord Laming's report into the Victoria Climbié tragedy. Elsewhere, the Royal Colleges of Paediatrics and Child Health, Psychiatrists, and GPs have jointly protested about detaining children and young people pending deportation of their families after failed asylum appeals. (Both in *RCGP News*, February 2010: 4)

How much does alcohol cost?

Depends how you look at it. It costs the NHS £2.7 billion a year treating alcohol related conditions, and the overall cost to society is about £20 billion pa. In Scotland alone, adults drink the equivalent of 537 pints of beer, or 130 bottles of wine, or 46 bottles of vodka a year. This is partly because alcohol is so cheap and so available - licensing laws have been liberalised, bars offer promotions, and supermarkets sell alcohol for as little as 11p a unit. CMF has campaigned for licensing restrictions and a minimum price. (*BMJ* 2010;340:c372)

'The cruellest of cuts'?

No, not an article about forthcoming reductions in frontline NHS spending but a scholarly review of circumcision as a religious obligation. Reporting the practice within Judaism (quoting parts of Genesis 17:10-14) and (at greater length) within Islam, the authors also review claims that male circumcision could reduce sexual transmission of HIV from women to men by 60%, such that WHO has described the efficacy of circumcision as 'proven beyond reasonable doubt'. (*BJGP* January 2010:59-61)

Burn out hits all doctors

Dana Hanson, a Canadian dermatologist and the President of the World Medical Association, told the recent Global Forum of Health Leaders' conference that 45% of physicians worldwide are in an advanced state of burn out, with the figure even higher in developing countries. Women doctors have an increased risk of suicide and a significant proportion of all doctors have symptoms of anxiety and depression. 'Physicians should not have to choose between saving themselves and serving their patients', the president said. (*BMJ Careers*, 21 November 2009: GP160)

Working time directive

With reports emerging of conflicts for doctors wishing to work beyond their shift hours, we should note this salutary lesson from the decisions of a live-in care home manager. Rita Longbottom, a pensioner in Southport with dementia, locked herself out of her care home flat, but the manager refused to use her master key to let her back in. She said her shift had ended and she did not wish to violate the EU working time directive. A neighbour alerted a call centre in Bradford which sent a locksmith from Bolton. Reports of how long Rita was locked out range from two to six hours. (*Quadrant*, November 2009: 2)

Ethical advertising for homoeopathy?

Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine in Exeter, has claimed that the Society of Homoeopaths breaches its own code of ethics by posting 'speculative' statements on its website. The Society's code sets out rules it expects members to abide by, such as not being 'false, fraudulent, misleading, deceptive, extravagant or sensational' but Ernst lists a dozen specific claims on the Society's site for which there is no good clinical evidence. (*BMJ* 2009;339:b4605) Readers who prefer provocative videos to academic articles might like to visit richarddawkins.net/articles/4057

Look after our NHS

Talking about being provocative, the British Medical Association has spent a lot of members' money on its campaign 'Look after our NHS - publicly funded, publicly provided'. This has included sending out posters and an impressive 32-page booklet: *Warning! NHS market reforms are damaging our health service* which helpfully reviews history and gives a good evidence base for the BMA's 'Eight Principles for a public NHS'. (www.lookafterournhs.org.uk)

Free at the point of delivery

With the General Election looming, Eutychus is getting tired of everybody's slogans and soundbites, so enjoyed the different take of the BMA's *Hypocritus*: 'These days, methinks that the phrase 'free at the point of delivery' might be better suited as an advertising logo for a less-efficient security company that transports prisoners from court to jail'. (*BMA News*, February 13 2010: 11)