

The spiritual dimension

A recent article in the *Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association* set out the benefits of taking a spiritual case history. The authors recognise this will not be relevant for all but in certain circumstances it can be of special relevance to patients including those who have serious illnesses, a limited life expectancy, or chronic illness with major loss of function or high symptom intensity. Taking a spiritual case history can also strengthen the doctor-patient relationship through the patient's perception of being cared for as a complete human being.

(*J Norwegian Med Assoc* 2011. bit.ly/v2iRuk)

Gay blood-donor ban lifted

The UK's lifetime ban on blood donations from homosexual and bisexual men has been lifted. Under new rules men will be able to donate if they have not had anal or oral sex (with or without a condom) in the preceding twelve months. Sir Nick Partridge, of the Terence Higgins Trust, commented that it is impossible to say how many men will be able to start donating blood as 'the vast majority of gay men are still [sexually] active'.

(*BBC* 8 September 2011. bbc.in/raGAoB)

Wish you were here

The death of Steve Jobs, late CEO of Apple Inc, resulted in world-wide mourning. Apple's statement read: 'Steve's brilliance, passion and energy were the source of countless innovations that enrich and improve all of our lives. The world is immeasurably better because of Steve.' Although such eulogies sound messianic Jobs' creativity was highly valued by millions of happy consumers. What is less well known is that Jobs was adopted at birth, so for those struggling to come to terms with a 'Jobs-less' world the real question is 'What if he had never been?' His passing serves as a reminder of adoption as an alternative in crisis pregnancies.

(*Apple Inc.* 5 October 2011. bit.ly/nxRqYW)

Praying for patients

The Medical Defence Union's guidance on praying for patients strikes a balanced response to a sensitive issue 'which arouses strong feelings in those who see religious belief as a potential comfort for patients and those who see such discussions with patients as inappropriate in a clinical consultation.' The guidance allows doctors to offer prayer for their patients so long as discussion has established that the patient might be receptive and the offer of prayer is made 'tactfully' to enable the patient to decline without embarrassment.

(*Medical Defence Union* 12 July 2011 bit.ly/tfmlCi)

Stem-cell research

An editorial in the *New Scientist* on advances in ethical stem-cell research pointed to some fascinating findings such as the fact that humans have 'accessible stem cells' in the nose or that 'human fetuses shed stem cells into the fluid around them'. In terms of application these findings could lead to 'personalised stem-cell treatments that, ...are simpler than what has gone before.'

(*New Scientist* 17 October 2011. bit.ly/vjCaV0)

Cholera epidemic spreads

In October the UN reported that a cholera epidemic which is rapidly spreading throughout West and Central Africa is one of the biggest in the region's history. Some 85,000 people are said to have been infected and 2,466 deaths recorded. In Haiti the country is still wrestling with a cholera epidemic more than a year after the disease broke out although international funds and aid efforts have so far helped to curb its spread. The challenge to come will be the impact of the tightening world economy on international aid efforts.

(*Reuters* 11 Oct 2011. reut.rs/nRa2zk)

Wise use of resources

Staying with money, the World Health Organisation published a plan to tackle non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, which it says now pose a greater global burden than infectious diseases. According to the WHO the total cost of adopting these strategies in all low-and middle-income countries would be \$11.4bn (£7.2bn) per year. That's a large figure but a drop in the ocean compared to the £117 billion of UK taxpayers' money used to bail out the banks in 2008-2009. (*CMF Blog* 22 September 2011. bit.ly/qYAJhw)

Abortion stats: in the public interest

Healthcare confidentiality is integral to professional ethical standards but should confidential personal information be made available for research? This question is explored in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* especially in relation to the DoH decision to withhold data from the publication of its annual abortion statistics; a decision which was overturned by the High Court earlier this year after a Freedom of Information request was made by the ProLife Alliance. Complexities regarding the legal regulation of confidentiality and privacy are considered.

(*J Med Ethics* 2011. bit.ly/tlY81q)

The seven billionth baby

The UN reported that world population figures passed 7 billion on 31 October 2011 although there was some disagreement over the exact timing of the milestone with the US Census Bureau suggesting it will come between March and April next year and the Vienna Institute of Demography, opting for the first half of 2012. Whilst some used the announcement as a pre-text to argue for tighter population controls and wider availability of contraceptives and abortion, the BBC took a more balanced line exposing the failure of Western policymakers to deal with underlying issues of poverty and injustice.

(*BBC* 28 October 2011. bbc.in/tePbyp)

'Do Not Resuscitate' tattoo

And finally, an 81-year-old grandmother has gone to considerable lengths to ensure her 'living will' or 'advance directive' doesn't go un-noticed, by having the words 'Do Not Resuscitate' tattooed across her chest. The message extends to her back where a further tattoo gives the instruction 'PTO' with a picture of an arrow. Somewhat ironically, it seems that such instructions would not, by themselves, be legally binding.

(*BBC* 6 September, 2011. bbc.in/pcoTL4)