

## SPOTLIGHT ON: Obama's healthcare reforms

### what is the current US health system?

Currently 66.7% of US citizens receive healthcare through private insurance, provided mostly by employers or by directly approaching insurance companies. There are also government-funded insurance programs for specific groups: Medicare (for individuals 65 years and above, and some under 65 with long-term disabilities), Medicaid (for those in financial need who fulfil certain criteria), SCHIP (for children in low-income families who are not eligible for Medicaid), military health plans, state-specific health plans, and Indian Health Service (for eligible American Indians). Despite these programs, approximately 15.4% of Americans (46.3 million) are uninsured.

### what are Obama's healthcare reforms?

President Obama outlined his 'Obama Plan' in a speech to Congress in September. It outlines a number of proposed reforms, which include:

- Making it illegal for insurance companies to deny cover to an individual because of a pre-existing medical condition
- Requiring insurance companies to include cover for preventative care (eg mammograms) at no extra charge
- Creating a new marketplace ('The Exchange') where people without insurance can compare plans and buy them at competitive prices
- Reforming medical malpractice laws so that doctors can focus more on healthcare delivery
- Providing a new, voluntary public health insurance option

Under these plans every American would be required to obtain insurance. It is proposed that these reforms would be paid for by finding savings in the current healthcare system, which Obama described as 'full of waste and abuse'; an independent commission would be created to identify such areas.

### what do people think?

Liberal members of Obama's party, the Democrats, would rather the reforms go further, including a greater regulation of insurance companies and more generous subsidies to those less well-off. Some conservative members of his party, however, advocate removing a publicly run insurance option altogether.

The Republicans oppose government-run healthcare and have been staunchly opposed to his reforms; one Republican senator has, however, voted in support of some of Obama's proposals. Insurance companies originally supported many aspects of the reforms but have since published a report suggesting that premiums would increase under the reforms; fears of loss of business due to a public health insurance option have also been expressed. However, the mandate for every American to have insurance will create new customers for insurance companies.

Doctors and hospitals generally back the proposals but express fears that a publicly run insurance scheme may result in a decrease in their earnings.

(*Student BMJ* 2009;17:b1488, US Census Bureau. CPS Health Insurance Definitions; *census.gov*, The Obama Plan; *whitehouse.gov*, *bbc.co.uk* 2009; 10 September, *ibid*; 13 October, *ibid*; 13 October, *Health Care*; *gop.com*, *timesonline.co.uk* 2009; 14 October)

## assisted suicide law clarified

New guidance has been published to clarify the assisted suicide law in England and Wales. Many rejoiced with Debbie Purdy at the ruling that forced the publication of the guidance, following several failed attempts with the High Court and Court of Appeal. The guidance, published by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), details the circumstances under which individuals may be prosecuted for assisting in a suicide. However, it gives no guarantees of protection from prosecution and represents no change in the law.

Current assisted suicide legislation allows the DPP discretion when considering cases, but does not itself give direction over how that discretion should be exercised. In the new guidance, factors that weigh against a prosecution include the individual committing suicide having a 'clear, settled and informed wish' to do so and the individual helping them being 'wholly motivated by compassion'. Factors in favour of prosecution include the individual committing suicide being under 18 years old and having an impaired capacity to make informed decisions.

Lord Falconer said that the DPP had 'unquestionably changed the law' in issuing the guidance, but Dignity in Dying insisted that Parliament should still legislate. Both sides of the argument consider this a major stepping stone in the 'right-to-die' debate; 'right-to-life' groups have claimed that the DPP has exceeded his authority and effectively made it legal to assist suicide whilst others are hailing it a 'significant breakthrough' for patient choice. The current guidance is temporary and will be finalised following public consultation in Spring 2010; whether assisted suicide should be legalised is still hotly debated.

The Care Not Killing Alliance has published a response to the guidance, noting that the guidelines mark a 'shift in gravity' away from prosecuting in all cases unless there are clear public interest reasons not to. The Alliance also described the guidelines covering disabled people as 'discriminatory as well as dangerous'.

(*telegraph.co.uk* 2009; 31 July, *bbc.co.uk* 2009; 30 July, *ibid* 2009; 23 September, *timesonline.co.uk* 2009; 24 September, *carenotkilling.org.uk* 2009; 13 November)

## new Alzheimer's genes discovered

A British-led study has discovered two new genes believed to be associated with Alzheimer's, with a French-led study uncovering a third. The British-led study has been hailed as 'the biggest advance in Alzheimer's research in 15 years'; genetic faults are thought to account for 60-80% of an individual's risk of developing the disease.

The first gene, clusterin (CLU), produces a protein of the same name, which is known to protect the brain in a variety of ways, helping the brain remove destructive amyloid protein and reducing inflammation caused by an overactive immune response. The second gene, PICALM, plays an important role in the formation of memories. The French-led study, involving more than 14,000 DNA samples, highlighted the third gene, complement receptor 1 (CRI), with mutations in that gene believed to be involved in 4% of Alzheimer's cases.

The recent findings have increased the hope of finding the primary cause of Alzheimer's and increase the chances of both fighting the disease and improving the lives of those affected. The

British researchers are planning an even larger study with up to 60,000 participants.

([alzheimers-research.org.uk](http://alzheimers-research.org.uk) 2009; 6 September, [timesonline.co.uk](http://timesonline.co.uk) 2009; 7 September)

## human material can be used in hybrid experiments without consent

New rules have given scientists working on stem cell research permission to use human tissue without the express consent of the individual it came from. The legislation, part of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, came into force on 1st October and covers material such as blood and tissue samples collected by the NHS during treatment and biopsies, and specimens from 'tissue banks' stored before the legislation was introduced.

According to the Act, such material can be used in somatic-cell nuclear transfers with human and non-human ova. Scientists are expected to gain explicit consent before obtaining samples but are permitted to use the material if the samples were taken before the 1st October 2009 and the donor cannot be contacted.

Joyce Robins, co-director of Patient Concern, expressed fear that most people would not be aware of the changes whilst Professor David Jones, director of the Centre for Bioethics and Emerging Technologies, said that many may have donated to medical research in the past but would now be unaware that their tissue 'could be used to clone an embryo'. In a recent study, 50% of couples who stored embryos at fertility clinics could not be tracked down after 5 years. A spokesman for the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

stated that circumstances under which scientists wished to create hybrid embryos were 'very specific' and the chances of such a creation without explicit consent were still 'very small'. Licences permitting such embryos are still required to meet legal criteria and applications must be approved by an ethics committee before being granted.

(*Lancet* 2009;374:861-863, [telegraph.co.uk](http://telegraph.co.uk) 2009; 12 September)

## carbon emissions: is the third world to blame?

A study published in the journal *Environment and Urbanisation* has claimed that population increase in third world countries has a much lower impact on climate change than over-consumption by developed nations. It advises that western countries should aim to reduce consumption in their own countries, rather than focusing on reducing population growth in developing countries.

The study, carried out by a London based think-tank, looked at worldwide changes in population and greenhouse gas emissions between 1980 and 2005. The author of the study Dr Satterthwaite said: 'A child born into a very poor African household who during their life never escapes from poverty contributes very little to climate change, especially if they die young, as many do. A child born into a wealthy household in North America or Europe and who enjoys a full life and a high-consumption lifestyle contributes far more – thousands or even tens of thousands of times more.'

These findings fall in line with another study published recently, carried out by the New Economics Foundation. They concluded that a typical British person would take roughly four days to

generate the same amount of carbon emissions that a person in Tanzania would take a year to create.

This perspective raises interesting questions for debate between those who support the call for worldwide population restraint by the Optimum Population Trust, such as Sir David Attenborough, and those who oppose this view.

(*timesonline.co.uk* 2009; 29 September, *Nucleus* 2009; July:8-16 *www.cmf.org.uk*)

### doctors call for tough alcohol measures

Doctors in the UK have called for a comprehensive ban on all forms of alcohol advertising to curb rising alcohol consumption. The call was made in a report published by the British Medical Association (BMA) in addition to other proposals, including a rise in the minimum price of alcohol, an increase in taxation linking it to units of alcohol in drinks, and a reduction in licensing hours. Professor Gerard Hastings, author of the study, said that alcohol promotion was helping to 'normalise drink as an essential part of everyday life'. The report paid particular concern to increasing alcohol consumption amongst young people.

Alcohol campaigners welcomed the recommendations. Alison Rogers of the British Liver Trust commented that current advertising practices led people to feel that alcohol 'is just the same as life's essentials like bread and milk' and the report provided a 'compelling case for change'. However, Jeremy Beadles of the Wine and Spirit Trade Association voiced concern that the proposed measures would adversely affect consumers and employees of the drinks industry. He also expressed doubt that higher taxation and

prices would curb alcohol misuse, but instead this required long-term education and tough enforcement. Britain has some of the highest taxes on alcohol in Europe.

Currently 37% of the population drinks more than the recommended number of units of alcohol per week, with alcohol related disease costing the NHS anything up to three billion pounds each year. According to the World Health Organisation, alcohol has the third largest burden of disease globally.

(*bbc.co.uk* 2009; 8 September, *timesonline.co.uk* 2009; 9 September, *bma.org.uk* 2009; 'Under the influence')

### PETA and 'moobs'

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have released an advert showing a full-breasted, overweight man. The billboard has been displayed outside the Southern General Hospital in Glasgow with the caption: 'Dude looks like a lady? Lose the breasts. Go vegetarian.' The aim of the advert, PETA say, is to warn meat-eaters of the link between obesity and gynaecomastia; they claim obesity can be caused by consumption of animal-derived products.

Scotland has seen an 80% increase in the number of requests for breast reduction surgery in men, an increase fuelled by obesity according to Scottish plastic surgeon Ken Stewart. PETA Director of Special Projects, Poorva Joshipura, maintained that gynaecomastia means that there is 'nothing manly about meat' and that gynaecomastia was another good reason, along with other examples such as cruelty to animals, to go vegetarian.

According to PETA, meat-eaters are nine times more likely to become obese than vegans. I would suggest that this is obvious, but not simply because of consumption of animal products; and I could fashion a reasonable argument to counter the other comments by PETA, but what do I know? I am a meat-eating Christian medical student!

(*timesonline.co.uk* 2008; 6 July, *peta.org.uk* 2009; 9 September)

## fresh or frozen?

There is great news for us medical students with sensible freezer stocking habits. Researchers at Sheffield Hallam University have found that frozen fruit and vegetables are often the same and sometimes superior nutritional value to the fresh.

The reason for this is that frozen food is often frozen almost immediately after harvest, whilst fresh fruit and vegetables are passed link-to-link, starting from producer, before they finally reach the customer up to a month after their harvest. In this period the vegetables deteriorate and gradually become depleted of their nutrients. According to research, for example, frozen peas contain a higher level of beta carotene than fresh peas. The advantage to the Government is of course that frozen veggies are cost efficient and can now be marketed as the healthier option.

I could not help but make the comparison between this article and the kingdom of God. I wonder though as a student if this can be related to me in any way. I imagine the question being asked of me: 'how would you like your faith Tosin, fresh, straight from the Lord of the harvest or frozen to savour all that freshness to be used for another day?' Whilst the frozen type is very

efficient for vegetable preservation, I am not sure we are built for the same sort of standstill. For like fresh vegetables: 'Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day' (2 Corinthians 4:16).

(*dailymail.co.uk* 2009; 11 September, *telegraph.co.uk* 2009; 11 September)

## HIV infections and deaths fall

World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNAids figures show a drop in both new HIV infections and AIDS related deaths. New infections have been reduced by 17% since 2001. This is thought to be due to the impact of HIV prevention programmes - particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Infection rates have also fallen substantially in south-east Asia and eastern Europe. Anti-retroviral therapy is also reducing infection in children as more mothers are treated during pregnancy.

However, the number of people infected worldwide is still rising - estimated at 33.4 million people living in 2008. Part of this increase is because fewer are dying with HIV. Data suggests that the pattern of infection is changing worldwide, with increased transmission between heterosexual couples, who are still perceived (wrongly) by many to be at very limited risk. UNAids has recently set up a social networking site at *AIDSpace.org* to bring together those suffering from and treating the disease.

(*bbc.co.uk* 2009; 24 November, *UNAids.org* 2009; 25 November)

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