

xenotransplantation

In response to the shortage of human organs available for donation, experts are investigating the use of pigs to harvest organs. By using pigs created with human genes, researchers hope pig organs will not be rejected by the human host.

Scientists say a trial transplanting porcine corneas into humans could begin by 2013.

Researchers at Pittsburgh University recently wrote in *The Lancet*: 'with new genetically modified pigs becoming available that are likely to improve the outcome of cellular and corneal xenotransplantation further, we believe that clinical trials will be justified within the next two to three years.'

Animal studies suggest that transplantation of larger vital organs such as the lungs or heart are likely to take longer due to issues with clot formation and excessive bleeding. They state: 'These problems mean that the longest survival time for pig organs in non-human primates to date ranges from a few days for lungs to around six to eight months for hearts, and trials of solid organ transplants of this nature in humans are likely to be several years away.'

telegraph.co.uk, 5 Nov 11

male breast cancer

Only 1% of breast cancer cases are in men. Nevertheless, it would appear that the NHS is failing male breast cancer patients.

There have been suggestions that men who are diagnosed with breast cancer are less than satisfied with the provision of care available. Research conducted by the website

www.healthtalkonline.org found that the female oriented health service was the reason men often felt neglected, with most men likely to be the only male in breast cancer clinics.

Current healthcare is understandably tailored towards women, and this is reflected in advertising campaigns and information leaflets. One patient interviewed highlighted that the information pack they received informed them to bring a soft bra to their operation. Another patient commented on the difficulties they had with collecting prescription medication, being told that the drugs were only for women.

It would appear that the problem lies with the widespread misconception that men do not get breast cancer; public knowledge on this matter is far from adequate. Consequently healthcare workers may be surprised when confronted with the signs of what appears to be a case of breast cancer in a male patient. Though 'common things are common', rare diseases do happen.

bbc.co.uk, 20 October 2011

three dead after churches claim HIV cure

Three people have died in London following advice from their pastors urging them to stop taking anti-retroviral medication.

The women were told that they had been healed by God and therefore should stop taking their medication.

One witness from Newham, East London, told the BBC that the pastor told her friend to 'stop taking her medication – that God is a healer and has healed her'.

Another friend from East London also came

forward with a similar story. Professor Jane Anderson, director of the Centre for the Study of Sexual Health and HIV, in Hackney, spoke about being involved in another case where a patient died as a result of advice from her pastor. 'We see patients quite often who will come having expressed the belief that if they pray frequently enough, their HIV will somehow be cured', Anderson said.

One HIV prevention charity, the African Health Policy Network (AHPN), expressed concerns regarding a growing number of London churches encouraging similar behaviour. The AHPN chief said 'this is happening through a number of churches. We're hearing about more cases of this.'

When questioned by the BBC, one of the churches suspected of engaging in these practices responded 'We don't ask people to stop taking medication... Doctors treat; God heals'.

A recent House of Lords committee report into HIV awareness said that faith groups' approaches to supporting people with HIV had improved but more needed to be done: 'It is essential that faith leaders engage with HIV as an issue and provide effective and truthful support and communication around the subject,' it said.

As long as a minority of church leaders continue to engage in such reckless practice, the damage done to people, their families and to the reputation of Christianity will continue.

bbc.co.uk, 18 October 2011

social networking may be changing brains

According to research undertaken at University College London, there is a direct link between the number of

Facebook friends we have and the amount of grey matter in certain parts of our brain.

The study also showed that the number of Facebook friends a person was actually in touch with was reflected in the number of their 'real-world' friends.

Brain scans of 125 students showed the amount of grey matter in the amygdala, which is associated with memory and emotional responses, was linked to the size of our social networks.

Several other brain areas were studied, and these were linked to the number of Facebook friends someone had, though not to 'real-world' friendships.

Dr John Williams, Head of Neuroscience and Mental Health at the Wellcome Trust, which funded the study, said: 'This new study illustrates how well-designed investigations can help us begin to understand whether or not our brains are evolving as they adapt to the challenges posed by social media.'

Although the study demonstrated a link between social network size and size of certain brain areas, it did not claim to prove cause and effect.

Commenting on the weakness of any link between the numbers of Facebook and 'real world' friends, Dr Heidi Johansen-Berg, reader in Clinical Neurology at the University of Oxford's Centre for Functional MRI of the Brain, said: 'Perhaps the number of Facebook friends you have is more strongly related to how much time you spend on the internet, how old you are, or what mobile phone you have. The study cannot tell us whether using the internet is good or bad for our brains.'

bbc.co.uk, 19 October 2011

mortality rises at weekends

Patients admitted to hospital at the weekend are about 10% more likely to die than those admitted from Monday to Friday, according to a new report published by research group Dr Foster. In a handful of hospitals, the difference was worse, at nearer 20%. Royal College of Nursing Chief Executive, Dr Peter Carter, said that NHS trusts needed to look at staffing levels 'as a matter of urgency'. Patients Association Chief Executive Katherine Murphy said that 'patients deserve safe, effective care no matter what the time of day is. They deserve nothing less.'

Some hospitals were much more affected than others, suggesting that it is possible even within the current system to effect changes. The research also looked at overall death rates, and noted that nearly a third of hospitals had higher than expected mortality on at least one measure.

bbc.co.uk, 27 Nov 2011; telegraph.co.uk 27, Nov 2011

Christian pastor faces execution in Iran for refusing to renounce his faith

Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, a pastor of the Church of Iran, is facing execution by hanging for refusing a court order to return to his former religion and renounce his Christian faith. He has been a Christian for 15 years, with the authorities claiming he directly converted from Islam. If the execution proceeds, Pastor Nadarkhani would be the first Christian to be officially executed in Iran for religious reasons in 20 years. The married father-of-two was detained in October 2009, and initially charged with 'protesting', but the charges later changed to 'apostasy' (abandoning Islam), and

'evangelising Muslims'. Both charges carry the death penalty. He is alleged to have been arrested for questioning the 'Muslim monopoly on religious instruction' in Iran, and with as many as 100,000 Christians in the country, the Iranian leadership is reported to be concerned with the spread of Christianity.

In September 2011, he was found guilty of apostasy and sentenced to death after he declared that he cannot 'recant his faith in Jesus Christ'. There has been considerable international attention paid to the case, and Iranian authorities are reported to have now changed the charges to include allegations of rape, and that Nadarkhani is a security threat. The case is awaiting review by Iran's supreme leader Ali Khameni, with a decision expected in mid-December. Although Iranian and US media coverage of the case has been at variance (coverage in the UK has been less than in the US), one Middle Eastern source has said that international attention 'may be the only reason [Nadarkhani is] still alive'.

global.christianpost.com, 12 November 2011

fewer 'sick notes'?

Around 300,000 people each year miss time at work due to long-term sickness. A recent report suggested that 77% of GPs admit to certifying sickness in patients for reasons other than physical health.

A review undertaken by Professor Carol Black suggests significant changes to the current system. An independent assessment service would take over some sickness certification from GPs. The report's co-author, David Frost of the British Chambers of Commerce, explained

that those off work for long periods often struggled: 'You start to lose the will to work and what we've got to do is to find a way of actually working with them, encouraging them and providing real, practical help. And that's what the assessment service would do.'

The reports authors suggest that taxpayers may save £350 million annually from the changes. A Department of Work and Pensions spokesman said that 'the economy loses £15 billion in lost economic output each year due to sickness absence and we cannot continue to foot this bill'. However BMA deputy chair Dr Richard Vautrey sounded a note of caution, saying that, 'If what is being described is a proper occupational health assessment at an earlier stage in the patient's illness then that would be helpful. But if it turns out to be a punitive process just to try and save money without the best interest of the patient at the heart of the process then it will fail.'

bbc.co.uk, 19 November 2011

emails on a contact lens?

Early animal trials at Washington University suggest a device that could allow texts or emails to be read via a contact lens may be a step closer. Initial safety tests in rabbits have shown that a lens with a single light-emitting diode powered from a wireless battery source can safely be used.

Professor Babak Praviz, lead researcher, said 'Our next goal is to incorporate some predetermined text in the contact lens'. Long-term applications might involve journey directions for drivers, reading emails or text messages, or video games.

Normally humans can only focus on items a few centimetres from the eye, and adaptations of the contact lens have been needed to shorten the focal distance. Challenges also arise from the delicacy of materials used in contact lens manufacture, and the minute scales needed.

Some development is still needed. Currently, the wireless power source needs to be within a few centimetres of the lens, and far more than one light-emitting diode will be needed for displaying text or games.

Medical applications are also envisaged, with a company in Switzerland having already marketed a contact lens that can monitor intraocular pressure in glaucoma sufferers, and suggestions that lenses could be linked to biosensors to provide up-to-date physiological readings, such as blood glucose levels.

bbc.co.uk, 19 November 2011

Cameron: Dawkins 'doesn't get it'

David Cameron was responding to a question posed by Richard Dawkins in *The Guardian*. Dawkins had asked why a child should go to a faith school when no-one would label them 'a Keynesian child' or 'a Conservative child' on the basis of their parents' views. Cameron responded 'Comparing John Maynard Keynes to Jesus Christ shows, in my view, why Richard Dawkins just doesn't really get it... The Church was providing good schools long before the state got involved, and we should respect the fact that it's not just the state that can provide education but other bodies too.'

guardian.co.uk, 25 November 2011