

Loneliness epidemic

While Age UK warns of a looming epidemic of loneliness among the over 50s, a global poll by the BBC suggests that those in their teens and twenties are the loneliest group in society, and not just in the UK, but worldwide. Increased connectivity and the ability to travel have, it seems, exacerbated rather than diminished social isolation. The attendant physical and mental health problems have given policymakers reason for concern. Despite headlines about social prescribing by GPs and postal delivery workers (formerly 'postmen/women') checking in on the elderly on their rounds, a year into her tenure as the world's first Minister for Loneliness, MP Tracey Crouch must be wondering whether government really has a solution. *The Times* 13 September 2018 bit.ly/2CRCBNR

Transgender consultation ignores women

Women's rights groups have challenged the government's recent consultation on the right to gender self-identification, saying that it ignores the needs of women. MP Maria Caulfield addressed a recent gathering of these groups at Westminster, saying that the parliamentary inquiry into transgender rights 'didn't really look at the implications for women as a whole...[and] was fundamentally flawed'. With a recent case of a 'trans-woman' sex offender being jailed in a women's prison only to assault four fellow prisoners, the room for abuse is obvious. Others are concerned that women are in danger of being effectively legislated out of existence if anyone could self-identify as a woman. The clashes between feminists and trans-activists have become an ugly feature of the current debate but show how the rights of one group so easily come at the cost of another. *The Guardian* 17 October 2018 bit.ly/2R3gNRO

Genetic genocide for mosquitos

The humble mozzie gets a bad press as insects go. Being a vector for many viral and parasitical diseases, the mosquito has been subject to repeated attempts at elimination. But where swamp drainage and DDT did not fully succeed, new genetic techniques to 'breed infertility' into the population have caused total collapse within two or three generations in the lab. But is wiping out a species tampering with ecology? It raises the ethical question about whether, as stewards of creation, humanity has the right to destroy an entire species. *BBC News* 24 September 2018 bbc.in/2EvSctK

Opioid deaths increase organ transplants

It is no secret that the USA faces a major crisis from the abuse of opioids, with the number of related deaths doubling in the last decade. The ironic upside to this is that four times as many opioid users are registered organ donors now than in 2008. With the first drop in the size of the organ donor waiting list in 25 years of steady increases, the increased number of opioid user organ donors is being recognised as a major cause of this turnaround. Because the victims are often young, otherwise healthy and are regularly rushed to hospital and ventilated before being declared brain dead, they are ideal organ donors. While no one would choose this as a strategy for increasing organ donation, it is at least a silver lining to a very dark cloud. *Vox* 24 September 2018 bit.ly/2QW2aAz

Are too many GPs retiring too early?

Research has long shown that GPs who retire in their 50s outlive those who continue working to statutory retirement age, so the trend to early retirement is nothing new. However, it seems the pressures of being a modern GP are not only driving the vast majority to work only part-time, but increasingly to retire early. This at the very time when there is a struggle to attract junior doctors to train as GPs. Ironic, that our primary care model is one being exported around the world just as it falls further into crisis at home. *The Times* 28 September 2018 bit.ly/2NQHEDp

Making eggs and sperm from body cells

The latest research out of Japan on induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) suggests that within the next decade or two, we may be able to create gametes out of somatic cells. Those with infertility problems would be offered the chance of healthy children. But it also means that anyone, of any age could in theory become a parent. It offers the potential for more genetic screening – making 'designer babies' more of an option, and even offers the disturbing prospect of so-called 'uniparents' – where one individual provides both sperm and egg to create a child. For now, this technology is still at animal laboratory test level, but in a decade or two we may have some very difficult ethical questions to wade through. *The Guardian* 14 October 2018 bit.ly/2ykANsd

Organ donor registration ad goes too far

The drive to increase organ donation is global. It also leads to some very questionable approaches. An Australian ad sought to 'lightheartedly' show how easy it is to go on the organ donor register by portraying two Roman guards persuading Jesus on the cross to sign up as a donor. Needless to say, the advert has caused much offence to Muslims and Christians. It is sad that such a tasteless approach was taken to such a serious topic. *The Drum* 16 October 2018 bit.ly/2QZO4gq

Wales to follow Scotland in alcohol pricing

If ever there was an argument for not decriminalising drugs, it would be the massive health and social toll caused by alcohol and tobacco. The strategy of the moment in dealing with the alcohol crisis is minimum per unit pricing (MPUP). Many hate the idea of taxes as a 'nudge policy' to reduce problem drinking, but the research is mounting from around the world to show that it works. So with Scotland having taken the plunge in 2012, the Welsh Government is following suit with a consultation on bringing in MPUP in, in the next couple of years. Public Health England is watching how this works out in Scotland and Wales before making its decision on MPUP. *The Guardian* 28 September 2018 bit.ly/2InVAiq

Contaminated blood scandal gets a full inquiry

Regarded as the worst scandal in the history of the NHS, the story of how contaminated blood and blood products, mainly from the US, were imported into the UK in the 70s and 80s, despite the risks being well known, is still shocking. Over 1,800 people with haemophilia were infected with HIV and thousands more with Hepatitis B and C. After many years of campaigning and several smaller scale inquiries, a full public inquiry has been launched by the British government. *The Guardian* 27 September 2018 bit.ly/2CUhxFA