

bmj.com news roundup

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Patient complaints procedure uncertain as health councils abolished

English community health councils, which have for the past 28 years been the voice of NHS consumers and have helped patients to make complaints, are to be abolished from 1 September, the government has finally announced.

Their future had been uncertain for some time, but the latest announcement of the formal abolition date was described as the "worst possible news" by Malcolm Alexander, the director of the Association of Community Health Councils in England and Wales.

He argues that the new system of 571 patient forums to replace the 184 community health councils will be seriously underfunded and that because the patient forums will not be fully operational until April 2004, patients will have nowhere to go for help with complaints in the meantime.

The newly established Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health (11 January, p 70) has said it is working closely with the Department of Health to provide independent support for complaints by 1 September, to coincide with the community health councils' abolition.

Lynn Eaton *London*

Consumers' Association calls for better information for patients

Primary care trusts need to appoint information brokers to help explain a patient's condition to them, rather than expect hard pressed GPs to be able to spend time doing so, says the Consumers' Association.

The proposal is one of a series of suggestions in a report



Chocolate cigarettes "recruit" children to smoking

Sweet manufacturers in the United Kingdom have long refrained from making sweets that mimic cigarettes because of protests from the antismoking lobby. But Italian sweet makers are not similarly constrained.

Surgeon Jayant Vaidya of the department of surgery, University College London, spotted these chocolate cigarettes (pictured above) on sale at Florence airport's duty free shop last month. Mr Vaidya, who is a specialist registrar at the Whittington Hospital, told the *BMJ*: "Surely this way of enticing and 'recruiting' children should not be allowed."

In fact, the World Health Organization Tobacco Convention will recommend banning such sales. Article 16.1 of the proposed convention says: "Measures may include prohibiting the manufacture and sale of sweets, snacks, toys or any other objects appealing to minors, in the form of tobacco products."

The last round of negotiations on the framework are due to take place later this month.

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

published this week that outlines research into the changing needs of a public that is increasingly well informed about health issues.

"Some health professionals can find this quite a challenge, not least when time is limited," said Wendy Garlick, principal policy adviser with the association and author of the report.

The association also wants to see the establishment of a single central and impartial source of information on medicines and treatment—although it has suggested that this might be partly funded by the pharmaceutical industry.

Lynn Eaton *London*

Patient Information: What's the Prognosis? is available, price £20, by phoning 0800 252100; a summary is available at www.which.net/campaigns/health

Sleep deprivation increases cardiac risk in women

Chronic sleep deprivation increases the risk of heart disease in women, a new North American study has found (*Archives of Internal Medicine* 2003;163:205-9).

Researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health in Massachusetts and from the Department of Medicine in Vancouver, British Columbia, undertook a prospective cohort project involving 71 617 women enrolled in the nurses health study. The women, aged 45 to 65 years at the start of the study, had no history of heart disease at that time.

The participants completed

a detailed questionnaire about sleep habits when the study started in 1986 and were followed up for 10 years.

Through 10 years of follow up, a total of 934 coronary events (271 fatal and 663 non-fatal) were documented. After adjusting for body mass index, smoking history, and other risk factors, the researchers found that the age adjusted relative risk for heart disease, when compared with a standard of eight hours' sleep in 24 hours, was 1.45 (range 1.10-1.92) for women reporting five hours or less of sleep.

Deborah Josefson *Nebraska*

Report says 100 Roma women have been forcibly sterilised in Slovakia

The Slovak health ministry is investigating a new report that claims that more than 100 Roma (Gypsy) women were forcibly sterilised or coerced into being sterilised in Slovakia over the past 13 years—many in the past five years.

The report, by the New York based Centre for Reproductive Rights and the Slovak Centre for Civil and Human Rights, says the practice stems from Communist times, when Roma women were paid to be sterilised to keep the Roma population down.

"In almost all cases the operation is not discussed with the woman in advance, but she is forced into signing a consent form during childbirth, not realising what it is. In some cases women were screamed at and told they would die if they didn't have the operation. Doctors think they are doing the right thing, but these women are not consenting to the operations," Kathy Martinez, director of the New York centre's international programme, told the *BMJ*.

The health ministry confirmed that it was investigating the claims.

Katka Krosnar *Prague*