

In brief

NHS to lower age for flu vaccine: The Department of Health is to lower the age at which people are offered the influenza vaccine free of charge from 75 years to 65 to try to reduce the incidence of the disease next winter.

India to withdraw compulsory iodisation of salt: Indian health experts are angry over the health ministry's proposed withdrawal of compulsory iodisation of edible common salt. Surveys by different agencies show that iodine deficiency disorders are endemic in 241 out of 282 surveyed districts, with a prevalence of more than 10% of the population.

Emergency contraception can be sold "over the counter": The UK Committee on Safety of Medicines has advised that emergency contraception (levonorgestrel 0.75 mg) should be reclassified from a prescription only medicine to one that is available for sale by pharmacists for women aged 16 years and above.

NHS waiting lists fall: The number of people on NHS waiting lists in England has fallen by over 100 000 since March 1997. The number of people waiting over one year has dropped to 48 100. The total number of people waiting for treatment is 1 037 000.

Israel to allow doctors to advertise: Israel's parliament has passed a law that will allow doctors, dentists, psychologists, and other health professionals to advertise.

NHS should recruit more disabled people: The Department of Health has issued guidelines to NHS managers on how to recruit and retain disabled people. Six per cent of people working in NHS trusts and health authorities are disabled.

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News extra

More news stories are available on the BMJ's website

Appeal court refuses mother's request for hysterectomy

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

The Court of Appeal in London last week overturned a High Court ruling giving the go-ahead for a hysterectomy to be performed on a 29 year old woman with severe learning disabilities. Her mother had sought court sanction for the operation to stop her daughter's periods and prevent her from getting pregnant.

Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, president of the High Court's family division, said that High Court judge Mr Justice Wall had erred in holding that both treatments under consideration (a laparoscopic subtotal hysterectomy or the insertion of a Mirena coil) were lawful and that the woman's mother could choose whichever she preferred.

Dame Elizabeth said: "The patient has the right, if she cannot herself choose, not to have drastic surgery imposed upon her unless or until it has been demonstrated that it is in her best interests."

She said that Mr Justice Wall had been mistaken in applying the "Bolam" test, which is used in negligence cases to assess whether a proposed treatment is within the range of acceptable treatments among competent and responsible doctors.

He had to decide which operation was in the best interests of the woman, named only by her initials, SL, and there could be only one best choice. The Mirena coil reduces menstrual flow, and in some cases virtually stops bleeding altogether.

Dame Elizabeth said that it would have been within the "best interests" test if the judge had held that the less invasive procedure should be tried first and that doctors should come back to court for a further declaration sanctioning surgery if it failed.

The official solicitor, Laurence Oates, representing SL, had appealed against the High Court ruling, arguing that it was against the weight of the medical evidence, which favoured the Mirena coil.

Lord Justice Thorpe—who with Lord Justice Mance agreed with Dame Elizabeth—noted that few such applications had come to court since a 1992 judgment by the former president of the family division, Sir Stephen Brown.

Sir Stephen indicated in his judgment that cases need not come to court if two doctors agreed that the operation was necessary for therapeutic, rather than contraceptive, purposes; that it was in the patient's best interests; and that no practicable, less intrusive means of treating the condition existed.

Lord Justice Thorpe said that doctors' interpretation should incline towards the strict, rather than the liberal: "In view of the importance of the subject, if a particular case lies anywhere near the boundary line, it should be referred to the court." □

Digital radio relays text to remote doctors and nurses in Africa

Douglas Carnall *BMJ*

Public health educators will use satellite technology to link remote healthcare workers in Africa to high quality sources of health information.

The new service, called the Public Health Channel, will use a combination of satellite, digital radio, and text to enable healthcare workers in even the most remote parts of Africa to have access to the information and support that most doctors and nurses in the developed world take for granted.

The channel will be piloted in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, but the coverage of the AfriStar satellites, which transmit the signals, includes the whole of the continent. Future initiatives by the non-profit organisation involved, the WorldSpace Foundation, include a similar service via its AsiaStar satellite to Asia.

The initiative has been made possible by a commercial satellite company, WorldSpace, donating 5% of its bandwidth to charitable use. Users can down-

load audio material to a special digital radio receiver, or, with a specialised computer adaptor, use the same bandwidth stream to download text to a computer.

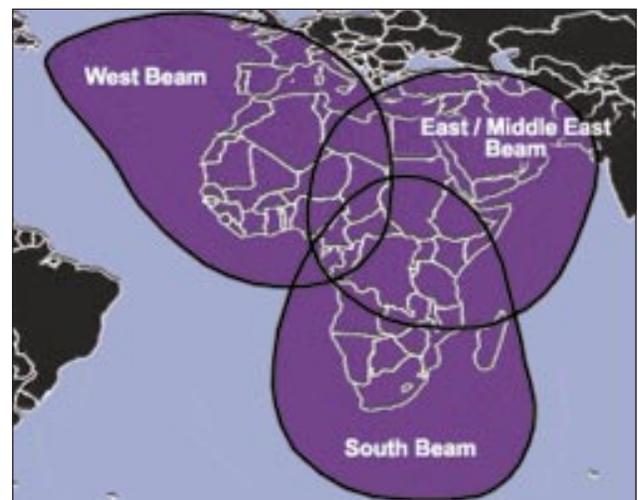
The information charity Satelife acts as content provider, making its combination of elec-

tronic archives and digital content available to its network of users.

The chief executive officer of the WorldSpace Foundation, Gracia Hillman, said: "Our service is cost effective, and provides a way of reaching people disadvantaged by poverty."

The digital receivers come with a built-in dish and retail in Africa for about £156 (\$250). □

More information is available at www.worldspace.org.



Projected coverage area of AfriStar satellites