



Good news from the DoH!

The columns of the newspapers and of the *SAMJ* have frequently voiced despair at the controversial and mixed messages emanating from the Department of National Health. The refreshingly positive speech (p. 1159) by the Deputy Minister of Health, Mrs Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, at the South African Medical Association Presidential Dinner therefore augurs well for co-operation between the profession and the department.

The Deputy Minister called for a close relationship between the Department of Health and all its partners in the public and private medical spheres. The central task that brings us together is that of improving the quality of care for all our people. She acknowledged the divisions on the treatment of HIV/AIDS, in which there is a perceived battle between modern and traditional medical science. While respecting the role of traditional medicine and the need to put more resources into its research, she deplored the charlatans who rob our people and expose them to unnecessary early death by luring them away from the established health system and promising them instant cures.

SAMA as a professional medical association can play an influential role because of the close interaction of its practitioners with patients, medical knowledge and experience. She identified the importance of SAMA in directing some of its resources towards developing a policy resource centre.

Particularly heartening was the Deputy Minister's emphasis on the importance of medical science for helping us to find solutions to our medical problems. She stressed the importance of evidence-based research and that our policy decisions must always be guided by the best available scientific knowledge, derived from credible, peer-reviewed research.

Human papillomavirus progress

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common sexually transmitted virus and is causally associated with cervical cancer. Bruce Allan and colleagues (p. 1186) explored the agreement between cervical abnormalities identified by cytology and detection of high-risk types of HPV.

HPV types infecting the genital tract are broadly divided into high- and low-risk types on the basis of their association with cervical cancer. The low-risk types are causally associated with genital warts. Pooled data from case-controlled studies showed that 15 types were classified as high-risk types and a further 3 were probable high-risk types. The Papanicolaou (Pap) smear test is the standard cytology screening method test used worldwide. It is inexpensive and simple but is only moderately accurate. The Digene Hybrid Capture 2 high-risk test (HC2) is the only commercially available assay system for HPV detection.

The authors found that HC2 detected a high prevalence of HPV (17%) in the population that they studied. Most women with high-grade squamous intraepithelial lesions (83%) were

positive, indicating that HPV testing could aid in the management of women with abnormal squamous cells of unknown significance. When costs decrease, HC2 could be introduced as an adjunct to Pap smears in identifying women at risk for high-grade cervical disease and could be helpful in the maintenance of those who remain Pap smear-negative.

A further important advance is that the development of vaccines showing protection against incident and persistent HPV-16 and HPV-18 infections, and incident HPV-31 and HPV-45 infections, is advanced.

Rural doctor honoured

His peers have voted Dr Vanga Siwisa Rural Doctor of the Year (Chris Bateman, p. 1154). The award is in recognition of his Herculean task of currently consulting close to 100 ARV patients per day.

Siwisa is an apartheid-era exile who qualified as a doctor in Lagos in 1977. He arrived at the 300-bed Taung District Hospital, which serves a huge community in North West province, in 2004. He was initially frightened by encountering the first minor side-effects to antiretroviral drugs in view of the health minister and government's pronouncements on the side-effects of these drugs. Siwisa believes that the award belongs to his entire clinic staff, who 'work like mad'. Inspiration comes from seeing those who came in on wheelchairs and stretchers, happy, smiling and up and about.

Termination of Pregnancy Act reduces morbidity

The Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act came into effect in 1996. Mbele, Snyman and Pattinson report on their studies on the impact of this Act on maternal morbidity and mortality in the West of Pretoria (p. 1196).

They found that the introduction of the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act has been associated with a massive reduction in women presenting with incomplete abortions. The prevalence of critically ill women due to complications of abortion has not changed, but the case fatality rate, mortality index and maternal mortality ratio have declined significantly.

Hypertension Guideline challenged

The recently published South African Hypertension Guideline (*S Afr Med J* 2006; **96**: 337-362) provides a comprehensive review of the causes, risks and treatment associated with abnormal blood pressure. Gaziano (p. 1170) argues that it falls short of offering a cost-effective approach to managing the burden. He proposes, *inter alia*, that the South African Hypertension Society could improve its guidelines by adopting a threshold for treatment based on global clinical risk.

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