

News from here and there

Moderation in marks at the MGR Medical University, Tamil Nadu

An exposé in *The Times of India* (2 October 2010) alleged that the former Vice-Chancellor of the MGR Medical University, Dr Meer Mustafa Husain, had awarded up to 45 'grace' marks to MB,BS students to enable them to pass examinations. This went on over the period of 2006–2009, when he was the Vice-Chancellor. The Medical Council of India guidelines stipulate that no more than 5 grace marks can be given to a student, and that these can be given only in one subject in a semester. It is being alleged that the marks were awarded in return for money. The government has ordered a probe, but since it appears that both the legislature and executive are involved, it would be amazing if anything came of the probe.

The entire process of selecting a Vice-Chancellor for the universities in Tamil Nadu is under a cloud. It is rumoured that bribes are paid to secure the post and the incumbents then proceed to cash in on the position by demanding bribes from colleges for various statutory sanctions.

GEORGE THOMAS, *Chennai, Tamil Nadu*

Health insurance scheme for Andhra Pradesh government employees on the anvil

The hugely popular 'Arogyasri' scheme (<http://www.aarogyasri.org>) was introduced on 1 April 2007 by the Government of Andhra Pradesh to assist poor families. The Arogyasri scheme is a unique model of public–private partnership in the field of health insurance and provides end-to-end cashless services for identified diseases through a network of service providers from the government and the private sector. Since the inception of the scheme, 35 lakh people have been screened and 7.5 lakh have undergone surgeries/therapies. There are reports that a similar health insurance scheme is on the anvil to benefit over 12 lakh employees of the state government. The scheme entails an annual premium payment of ₹900 per month by the employee's family. The benefits include payment of up to ₹1.5 lakh per year by the insurance company; if the health expenditure crosses that amount, another ₹50 000 would be paid by a separate trust intended for the purpose. Thus, a family will be eligible for a health expenditure benefit of ₹2 lakh, overall. The existing system, in which the employee has to make pre-payment for elective care and submit a 'letter of credit' for emergency service, allows each family member of the employee to be eligible for ₹2 lakh per year of health expenditure. It has been suggested that identity cards be issued to identify the employee and family and to prevent misuse; continuation of the existing system with suitable amendments for cashless transactions has been suggested as an alternative. There is a possibility of the scheme being implemented with effect from Ugadi (denoting the Telugu new year's day on 4 April 2011).

ALLADI MOHAN, *Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh*

The Bhopal gas disaster, the judgment and the aftermath

On 7 June 2010, a quarter century after the Bhopal gas tragedy, a Bhopal court convicted the former Union Carbide India Chairman, Keshub Mahindra, and 7 others in the Bhopal gas tragedy case and awarded them a maximum of 2 years' imprisonment. The hue and cry following the verdict led to the constitution of a group of ministers (GoM) to look into the grievances of the victims of the disaster. Following the directives of the GoM, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) officially inaugurated the National Institute for Research in Environmental Health at Bhopal on 11 October 2010. The minister for gas relief and rehabilitation, Government of Madhya Pradesh, Mr Babulal Gaur, the mayor of Bhopal, Mrs Krishna Gaur, and officials of the Government of Madhya Pradesh, Government of India and ICMR were present at the inauguration, and lent their support to the initiative. Victims of the gas disaster, members of the medical and scientific fraternity, and activists attended the inauguration.

The institute, which will be the thirtieth ICMR institution in the country with a national character, will study the long term effects of the toxic methyl isocyanate gas on the victims of the disaster. In addition, it will examine the impact of the disaster on the environment in the affected areas. This would include analysis of soil and water samples for the presence of toxic pollutants. Dr V. M. Katoch, Director General, ICMR, and Secretary, Department of Health Research, Government of India, reiterated the commitment of the ICMR towards the victims of the disaster. He said, 'The primary focus of the institute will be to carry out research to improve the health of the gas-affected population. We plan to achieve this by carefully analysing the residual physical as well as mental problems of affected people and find ways to improve the management of these conditions. The effect of perceived environmental contamination will also be carefully studied so as to provide a knowledge database for managing the related health issues. It is planned to gradually develop this centre into a reputed national institute of excellence for research in environmental health.'

At present, the institute is located in Kamla Nehru Hospital, in the section that houses the Centre for Rehabilitation Studies. It is planned to eventually build another campus of the institute, with state-of-the-art laboratories, once the Government of Madhya Pradesh allocates land for the construction of the buildings required for a permanent structure.

PRABHA DESIKAN, *Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh*

Test-tube baby pioneer awarded 2010 Nobel Prize in medicine

The 2010 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine was awarded to British scientist Dr Robert G. Edwards, who pioneered the technology of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), on which he began work in the 1950s. Robert Edwards is currently professor emeritus at the University of Cambridge.

His work has not only revolutionized fertility management, but has also revealed a wealth of knowledge about human embryology, and the growth and endocrine requirements of developing human embryos. Over 4 million people have now been born thanks to the development of *in vitro* technologies.

In collaboration with gynaecologist, Dr Patrick Steptoe, a pioneer in laparoscopic technique, Edwards was able to find a novel technique to harvest primed eggs directly from the ovaries. Such eggs yielded much more positive results for successful fertilizations.

During the 1970s, the UK Medical Research Council withdrew funding to Steptoe and Edwards' work. Their work continued through the support of private funding and the first successful 'test-tube' baby, Louise Brown, was born on 25 July 1978. Born to Lesley and John Brown, Louise was a full-term, healthy infant, delivered by caesarean section. Her birth changed the field of medicine forever.

Following this monumental accomplishment, the duo opened the Bourn Hall Clinic near Cambridge, UK, the first IVF centre in the world. Steptoe passed away shortly after in 1988 (and was thus ineligible for the Nobel Prize; the prize is not awarded posthumously).

It is now well established that 20%–30% of fertilized eggs will successfully result in a birth. One of the rare complications of this procedure is premature deliveries, but this is seen mostly in cases in which a single egg is implanted in the uterus. Longitudinal studies with the first generation of healthy IVF babies who had thrived into adulthood confirmed the safety and validity of this novel and innovative procedure.

Meanwhile, the 2010 award for chemistry may also impact on the field of medicine. The Nobel Prize was shared by Dr Richard Heck (USA), Dr Ei-ichi Negishi (USA) and Dr Akira Suzuki (Japan) for their work in 'palladium-catalysed cross-couplings in organic synthesis'. This basic science discovery has a vast impact on the development of a vast array of new molecules for medical therapeutics applications, as well as electronics. The new method

allows for increased precision of molecular synthesis with few byproducts. One promising new compound synthesized using this technique is dragsmacidin F. In recent trials, it has shown efficacy in manipulating both the HIV and herpesviruses. The future potential of the new line of molecules being developed is endless.

The award ceremony was held in Stockholm on 10 December 2010.

PAMELA VERMA, *Vancouver, Canada*

Roller coaster rides can alleviate asthma symptoms: An Ig Nobel discovery

The Ig Nobel Prize is awarded for research that 'first makes people laugh, and then makes them think'. This year's Ig Nobel Prize in medicine was awarded to Drs Simon Rietveld and Ilja van Beest of the Netherlands for their path-breaking discovery that dyspnoeic symptoms associated with asthma can be treated by placing patients on roller coasters.

Their study, 'Rollercoaster asthma: When positive emotional stress interferes with dyspnea perception', published in *Behaviour Research and Therapy* (2006;45:977–87), compared reports of dyspnoea among patients with severe asthma and normal controls. Intrigued by a well-established finding that lung function correlated poorly with patient's reports of dyspnoea, these researchers explored how fear and emotional context may influence this subjective symptom. Subjects were more likely to report dyspnoea before the ride, even if their actual lung function was reduced after getting off the roller coaster.

Overall, the endorphin high of being on a roller coaster can subjectively relieve patients of their subjective asthma symptoms, even in the setting of reduced lung function.

Perhaps pulmonary function laboratories should relocate to local theme parks!

PAMELA VERMA, *Vancouver, Canada*

The National Medical Journal of India is looking for correspondents for the 'News from here and there' section. We are particularly interested in getting newswriters from the north and northeast regions of India as well as from other countries. By news, we refer to anything that might have happened in your region which will impact on the practice of medicine or will be of interest to physicians in India. The emphasis of the news items in this column, which are usually from 200 to 450 words, is on factual reporting. Comments and personal opinions should be kept to a minimum if at all. Interested correspondents should contact SANJAY A. PAI at sanjayapai@gmail.com or nmji@nmji.in