

Australian Medical Association (NSW) Limited



ama action

Health news in the spotlight
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In the news this week ...

- Deadly Hendra virus surfaces in north Queensland
- T-rays to tackle skin cancer deaths
- Mums and bubs in Australia

Australia's mental health shambles must be fixed

AMA Vice President Dr Mukesh Haikerwal said today that Australia's poor response to people living with mental illness had resulted in very limited access to services and a greater demand on already stretched emergency departments and services for homeless people.

Dr Haikerwal said the disease burden from psychiatric illness in Australia was underestimated and too many people with mental illness were denied access to a hospital bed in times of crisis.

"The fact is many people living with mental illness need hospital care from time to time and the beds are just not there, Dr Haikerwal said.

"Dollars saved from closing mental health institutions and acute beds in hospitals have not been redirected to community-based care as promised, and vulnerable Australians are paying the price.

"We need more beds and better community-based care. Services must be better coordinated and include private psychiatrists as key providers of mental health care, he said.

Australia spends \$3.71 billion on mental health services – 7.5 per cent of total allocated health expenditure. To reach the 12 per cent average of other OECD countries, Australia must commit to an additional \$1.5 billion annually.

Statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show over 2 million people in Australia experience a mental illness each year.

"We must lift our game and protect this large and vulnerable group in our society with the excellent care they deserve," Dr Haikerwal said.

Deadly Hendra virus surfaces in north Queensland

The deadly Hendra virus killed a horse near Townsville last week and last month a Cairns vet contracted a mild case while conducting an autopsy.

The vet has since recovered but about 10 people in northern Queensland are being tested for symptoms of the virus.

The Hendra virus first appeared in Queensland a decade ago, killing two people and fifteen horses in two separate outbreaks.

The virus is classified as a new genus within the Paramyxoviridae family. The name Hendra comes from the Brisbane suburb in which the outbreak first occurred.

Unlike other viruses in the family, which tend to be host-specific, Hendra virus can infect more than one species of animal. Scientists believe fruit bats are the natural host of the virus.

Symptoms in horses include breathing difficulties, high fever and a blood-tinged foamy discharge from nose and mouth as the virus attacks blood vessels and causes pulmonary oedema. The Hendra virus produces both lung and brain disease, consistent with related viruses such as canine distemper and measles.

T-rays to tackle skin cancer deaths

Researchers from the new National T-ray Facility (NTF) at the University of Adelaide claim that T-rays may play a vital role in the battle to save 2000 Australians a year from death by skin cancer and other genetic disorders.

The researchers are working on a non-invasive imaging technique with the potential to reveal whether skin lumps are harmless or malignant, and ways to improve diagnosis of gene disorders.

Terahertz light, or T-rays, are emissions between infra-red and microwaves. They enable scientists to analyse the composition and density of materials the rays contact, as well as imaging them.

Professor Derek Abbott said, "One of the things T-rays can do very well is tell if a DNA strand is single or double. These new biochips contain up to 10,000 single-strand DNA detectors - and when they pair up with an identical strand, it means you've got the disease."

The role of T-rays in disease diagnosis is being explored at a two-day international workshop at the University of Adelaide University from today.

Researchers claim that having a device that can continually check any cancerous tissue remaining during surgery would save lives and a huge amount of repeat surgery and healthcare costs.

American researchers are also experimenting with a T-ray endoscope that might help to diagnose internal cancers, such as bowel or lung cancer.

Mums and bubs in Australia

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's report *Australia's Mothers and Babies 2002* released today found that while most births in Australia occur in hospitals, there were 637 reported homebirths in 2002, accounting for 0.3 per cent of all confinements. Around 2.1 per cent of confinements, or 5,379 deliveries, occurred in birth centres.

Mothers giving birth at home were older, with 30 per cent aged 35 years or older, compared to 18 per cent of mothers giving birth in birth centres.

The steady upward trend in caesarean rates of the last 10 years continued with the proportion of women having caesarean sections increasing to 27 per cent in 2002 compared to 19 per cent in 1993.

In 2002, 2.3 per cent of babies were born following the use of assisted reproductive technology (ART). Mothers of babies born following ART were on average 33.7 years old compared with the average age for all mothers of 29.4 years.

Did you know? AMA (NSW) members have the opportunity to purchase even more discounted tickets to select shows at the Sydney Festival which runs from 8 till 30 January. A list of the shows which attract a discount can be found on our website at www.nswama.com.au and information on the Sydney Festival can be found at www.sydneystfestival.org.au To take advantage of this offer, call Ticketek on 9266 4890 by 7 January and mention AMA (NSW).