



News in Brief

ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES INCREASE BREAST CANCER RISK

In a study presented at the European Cancer Conference in September 2007, researchers reported that breast cancer risk rises with increasing alcohol intake – regardless of beverage type. Over 70,000 women were recruited from 1978 to 1985 and followed till 2004.

Compared with women who consumed less than one alcoholic drink a day, those who consumed one to two drinks daily had a 10% increased risk of breast cancer. Those who drank more than three daily had a 30% increased risk.

This risk remained significant regardless of the choice of alcohol beverage.

(Source: European Cancer Conference and Physician's First Watch)

HIV VACCINE PROVES INEFFECTIVE

A vaccine designed to provoke T-cell immunity against HIV in uninfected persons has failed a clinical trial, according to reports in the *New York Times*. The STEP trial was stopped early by Merck, following interim analysis of 1,500 subjects. It showed that vaccine recipients had the same rate of acquiring HIV as recipients of placebo.

Furthermore, the viral load in infected subjects in both groups was similar, according to the *New York Times*.

STEP investigators have been told to stop vaccinating volunteers, and recruitment in a second Phase II trial in South Africa, as well as two additional Phase I trials, has been discontinued.

(Source: New York Times)

MEDICARE AUDITS SHOW PROBLEMS IN PRIVATE PLANS

Tens of thousands of Medicare recipients have been victims of deceptive sales tactics and had claims improperly denied by private insurers that run the system's huge new drug benefit program and offer other private insurance options encouraged by the Bush administration.

This was found by a review of scores of federal audits conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services, with 39 focusing on drug benefits, 44 focusing on managed care plans and eight examining other types of private plans.

The audits document widespread violations of patients' rights and consumer protection standards. Some violations could directly affect the health of patients — for example, by delaying access to urgently needed medications. In other cases, where auditors criticised a company's "policies and procedures", the effects on patients were not clear.

Medicare officials said that compliance problems occurred most often in two areas: marketing and the handling of appeals and grievances related to the quality of care. They have required insurance companies of all sizes to fix the violations by adopting "corrective action plans".

(Source: New York Times)

MICROSOFT OFFERS SYSTEM TO TRACK HEALTH RECORDS

HealthVault, an online platform where electronic health records can be stored, was announced on 4 October 2007 in Washington. This marks the start of a long-anticipated drive into the consumer healthcare market by Microsoft, which

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is also moving ahead at a time when other large technology companies have hit bumps in their health initiatives.

Organisations that have signed up for HealthVault projects with Microsoft include the American Heart Association, Johnson & Johnson, LifeScan, New York-Presbyterian Hospital, the Mayo Clinic and MedStar Health, a network of seven hospitals in the Baltimore-Washington region. The partner strategy is a page from Microsoft's old playbook. To make its operating system, Windows, the dominant platform for personal computers, Microsoft persuaded other companies to build on its technology, and it helped them do it.

"The value of what we are doing will go up rapidly as we get more partners," said Peter Neupert, the Vice-President in charge of Microsoft's health group.

The company hopes that individuals will give doctors, clinics and hospitals permission to submit information like medicines prescribed and data on blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Such data transfers would then be automatic, over the Internet, which is why the partnerships are so important.

The consumer health offering includes a personal health record and Internet searches

tailored for health queries, under the name Microsoft HealthVault (www.healthvault.com).

Personal information will be stored in a secure, encrypted database. Its privacy controls are set entirely by the individual, including what information goes in and who gets to see it. HealthVault searches are also conducted anonymously and will not be linked to any personal information in a HealthVault personal health record.

Privacy is a serious consideration and one likely to slow the spread of personal health records. Mr Neupert of Microsoft said the key to building trust in the service would be a track record on privacy. Consumers, he noted, were initially reluctant to try online banking because of privacy worries. But today, online banking is mainstream.

"It's going to be a long journey," Mr Neupert said. "To make a difference in healthcare, it is going to take time and scale. And Microsoft has both."

(Source: New York Times)

EYE ON WI-FI

Thousands of residents of remote villages in southern India have easy access to eye care now, thanks to a specially designed, low-cost and long-distance wi-fi network.

Wireless fixed links between nine vision centres and the Aravind Eye Hospital at Theni, in the state of Tamil Nadu, have been built. The network allows specialists at the hospital to interview and examine patients in nine remote clinics via high-quality video conference. About 2,500 patients per month are using the video conference to meet with a doctor.

Real-time eye examinations are conducted over a direct connection 150 times as fast as the old dial-up modem, which used to cost \$200 a year. The long-distance wireless link, installed at a cost of \$1,800, is practically free to operate.

Each vision centre is run by three paramedical technicians, so that eye doctors can do skilful work in the hospital such as surgery.

The current network is expected to expand in the state to include five hospitals within the Aravind Eye System Care that will be linked to 50 clinics. They are expected to serve half a million patients each year in rural South India - most of whom have no access to eye care today.

These vision centres will positively impact the health of the Indian economy, according to a recent study by the Aravind Eye Care System. It showed that 85% of the men and 58% of the women who had lost their jobs due to sight impairment were reintegrated into the workforce following treatment. ■

(Source: BBC News)

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