

News @ a glance

UBC focuses on obese kids: An innovative program at the University of British Columbia is combining exercise with on-line support, personal coaching and nutrition counselling in a bid to help children shed pounds. The children, aged 9 to 15, are between 14 and 27 pounds overweight. "Our personal coaches are the program's big secret," says Behnad Honarbakhsh, manager of the UBC's MET (Metamorphosis) Program (www.publicaffairs.ubc.ca/ubc-reports/2003/03apr03/exercise.html). "We have created an energetic, upbeat environment. The focus is not on losing weight — it's on constant education." — *Heather Kent, Vancouver*



Fat of the land: In a bid to stop obese Americans from suing the food industry, a Republican senator has introduced the Commonsense Consumption Act. The bill would prohibit claims based on an alleged injury or illness related to obesity or weight gain against a food manufacturer or retailer. "It's certainly not the restaurant's fault if you go back to the buffet bar 3 times," said Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says more than half of American adults and 13% of children are clinically obese.

Quebec butts out: Quebec residents led the way in reducing tobacco use in Canada in 2002 with a per capita drop in tobacco sales of 15.5%, the Non-Smokers' Rights Association says. The average decline elsewhere in Canada was 10%. "It's not unexpected," says spokesperson David Sweanor. "The biggest impact on consumption is price, and over the last 18 months prices have risen an average of 70%." The decline in Quebec is also due to a program that reimburses smokers for products such as the nicotine patch, says Sweanor. Data from the 2002 Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey (CTUMS) show

that Quebec now has the third-lowest rate of tobacco use in Canada (24%) after BC (17%) and Ontario (20%). In 1985, 40% of Quebec adults smoked.

Unmet needs of children with disabilities: Parents of many of the estimated 155 000 Canadian children (age 5 to 14) with some form of activity limitation don't get the help they need to deal with their child's condition. According to new data from the 2001 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey by Statistics Canada, about 94 000 of these children require specialized aids, such as hearing devices and wheelchairs, but half do without them. Cost was the main factor. Only a third of the 52 000 parents who said they needed help with housework, family responsibilities and respite actually received this assistance. Parents of 84 000 of these children (54%) said their child's condition had an impact on their employment, with some working fewer hours or quitting their job. In 7 out of 10 cases, the mother experienced these limitations.

Dermatologist shortage looms: There will be 50% fewer dermatologists in Canada by 2008, the Canadian Dermatology Association (CDA) says. "The big crunch will come in the next 7 to 8 years as people retire," adds CDA Executive Director Michelle Albagli. The shortage of instructors further complicates the situation. "We have to get all qualified dermatologists to take on teaching," said Albagli. The number of residency spots, now 5 per year, will also have to increase. By 2006 there will be a 9% net decrease in the number of practising dermatologists; this will leave a ratio of 1.6 dermatologists per 100 000 population, compared with 3.5:100 000 in the US. About 580 dermatologists currently practise in Canada.

Bedside manner: US medical students will have to pass a day-long test that will assess their bedside manner beginning in 2005. It will evaluate how well they interview and communicate with patients and

perform basic assessments. Poor communication is at the root of up to half of the 800 complaints received annually by the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine. The test will cost students US\$975. Since 1992, medical residents in Canada have had to take a similar test, the Clinical Skills Examination, which is part of the Medical Council of Canada (MCC) Qualifying Exam. It costs \$1300.

CMA argues for privacy: The CMA has jumped into the fray in a legal dispute over whether information gathered and sold by IMS Health (Canada) is a "work product" or private information. IMS and similar companies collect prescribing data and sell it to drug companies, which use it to market products to doctors (*CMAJ* 2003;168[3]:325). In September 2001, Privacy Commissioner George Radwanski ruled that the information was a work product; that decision is now being appealed. The CMA, which has been granted intervenor status in the Federal Court case, argues that Radwanski incorrectly analyzed Canada's privacy legislation.

Doctors for Cancer? In a gesture of support for his patients, Alberta general surgeon Noorali Bharwani had his head shaved to raise \$2200 for the Canadian Cancer Society. "We deal with so many cancer patients but we don't have a way to empathize with them," Bharwani said after his close shave. "This allows you to appreciate, at least in part, how they feel." The Medicine Hat surgeon hopes the idea catches on with other Canadian doctors. He notes that police officers already have Cops for Cancer, through which they gather pledges before having their heads shaved. And not only do people appreciate the gesture, says Bharwani (bharwani@monarch.net), but being a one-man comb-free zone "is very nice for the summer." — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

