

North-south mortality divide is widest for 40 years



The chances of dying at an earlier age are now even higher in the north of England compared to the south of the country.

Findings published in the British Medical Journal have revealed that the likelihood of people dying before they reach 75 is a fifth higher in the north, putting the north-south mortality gap at its widest for four decades.

Researchers from the University of Manchester compared death rates from 1965 to 2008 with figures show that in 1965 people in the north were 16% more likely to die before their 75th birthdays than southerners but the figures had risen to over 20% by 2008 with men more likely to be affected.

Lead researcher Professor Iain Buchan said people in the south had greater access to resources.

"There is an overall concentration of resource in the South, the 'built

environment' is very different, there's more access to education, transport and other large scale resources," he said.

Behavioural differences were not a factor, added Professor Buchan.

"These differences are not because those in the north are not looking after themselves... this is because of social, economic and health care resources controlled by government. For example, there are fewer GPs in deprived areas," he said.

The Department of Health said it was committed to reducing health inequalities with a ring-fenced public health budget, weighted towards the most deprived areas, to ensure resources are spent on preventative work, with incentives to improve the health of the poorest.

Public health expert Professor Alan Maryon-Davis said government cuts would worsen health inequalities.

17582

High blood pressure tips needed



UK researchers say high blood pressure patients would benefit from personal advice sessions.

A team from the University of East Anglia in Norfolk highlighted concerns that many of the 10 million people in the UK with high blood pressure - or hypertension - fail to take their medication.

Their findings published in the Journal of Human Hypertension showed a 14% reduction in blood pressure when people took part in "adherence therapy".

While high blood pressure, which is one of the leading causes of heart disease and stroke, can be treated with medication, the research team suggested that as many as half of patients do not take their medication in the right way because they are concerned about side effects or simply do not follow the correct instructions.

In the study of 136 patients in Jordan, half

took their medication normally while the rest had 20-minute face-to-face sessions weekly for seven weeks where they were given individual advice.

The patients given adherence therapy took 97% of their medication, while those who continued normally took only 71%. On average, systolic blood pressure dropped by nearly 14% from 164.5mm Hg to 141.4mm Hg.

Professor Richard Gray at the School of Nursing and Midwifery at University of East Anglia, said: "Our findings suggest a clear clinical benefit in these patient-centred sessions.

"Tackling the widespread failure to take medication correctly would lead to a major reduction in stroke and heart disease. If adherence therapy were a new drug it would be hailed as a potentially major advance in hypertension treatment."

17598

Key breast cancer gene found



UK researchers have taken a step forward in the fight against an aggressive form of breast cancer. The team of Cancer Research UK scientists have identified the gene which can cause the aggressive form of breast cancer to develop after identifying ZNF703 - the first "oncogene" to be discovered in five years.

Scientists at Cancer Research UK's Cambridge Research Institute and the British Columbia Cancer Agency in Vancouver, Canada carried out the study, which is published in *EMBO Molecular Medicine*.

They found that ZNF703 is overactive in around one in 12 breast cancers and could account for up to 4,000 UK cases a year.

Cancer Research UK now hopes it will help in the development of new breast cancer drugs. Professor Carlos Caldas, of the Cambridge Research Institute, led the research.

He said: "Scientists first discovered this region of DNA may be harbouring genes linked to the development of breast cancer 20 years ago. But it's only with the technology we have today that we've been able to narrow down the search sufficiently to pinpoint the gene responsible."

Professor Caldas explained that testing whether the gene was overactive in a patient's tumour could help highlight those more likely to be resistant to standard hormone therapies and help ensure the right drugs were matched to the right patient. Dr Lesley Walker, director of cancer information at Cancer Research UK, said the discovery was exciting because it was "a prime candidate for the development of new breast cancer drugs designed specifically to target tumours in which this gene is overactive."

UK

Water fluoridation not unlawful

The High Court has said that the South Central Strategic Health Authority was acting lawfully in looking to add fluoride to Southampton's water supply.

Resident Geraldine Milner brought the case against the authority but Mr Justice Holman said that the SCSHA's decision making process had not been "defective". The SCSHA said: "The board remains satisfied that water fluoridation is a safe and effective way to improve dental health and will now be considering its next steps."

17557

Eggs healthier than ever

Research has shown that the amount of cholesterol in eggs is far lower than it was a decade ago.

Researchers in Britain found that a medium egg contained around 100mg cholesterol - one third on an adult's 300mg daily allowance. A study from the US showed eggs had 13% less cholesterol than they did 10 years earlier. Andrew Joret, deputy chairman of the British Egg Industry Council, said: "We believe the reduction is due to changes in the feeds used in British plants since the Nineties when the use of bone meal was banned."

17559

Bid to change abortion law rejected

The High Court has rejected a bid by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) to let women having a pill-induced abortion take their medication at home.

Current rules mean a woman has to visit a clinic twice and take two pills at each visit to induce a miscarriage. The option is available to women in the first nine weeks of pregnancy. BPAS chief executive Ann Furedi said: "It cannot be morally right to compel a woman to physically take tablets in a clinic and to subject her to the anxiety that symptoms will start on the journey back when her doctor knows it is safe and indeed preferable for her to take these at home."

17566

Herbal diet pills warning

The Medicines and Health products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) have issued a warning over a type of weight loss product on sale in the UK.

Herbal Flos Lenicare capsules (also called Herbal Xenicol) can be bought online and are offered for sale in some Chinese medicine shops in the UK. The MHRA said they could potentially cause health problems and were linked with heart attacks and stroke. It said anyone taking the medicine should stop immediately and talk to their GP.

17576

Zinc effective treatment against colds

Experts have suggested that taking zinc syrup, tablets or lozenges can lessen the severity and duration of the common cold.

A review of the available scientific evidence suggests taking zinc within a day of the onset of cold symptoms speeds recovery and may also help ward off colds, according to the authors of the Cochrane Systematic Review that included data from 15 trials involving 1,360 people. However, they also warn that zinc cannot be used long-term because of toxicity concerns.

17581

Losing hair at 20 may put men at risk of prostate cancer

Research published in the journal *Annals of Oncology* has suggested that men who begin going bald at the age of 20 have twice the risk of prostate cancer in later life. It is believed that the link could help identify those most in danger of developing the disease, which is the most common cancer among men in the UK, and enable them to be targeted for screening. A study of 388 prostate cancer patients and 281 healthy volunteers found those with the disease were twice as likely to have started going bald when they were 20.

17583