Private hospital 'charged £130 for talcum'

PRIVATE hospital patients have been charged £130 for a tin of talcum powder, £12.86 for one sleeping pill and £6.80 for a strip of plaster, it was claimed yesterday.

Health insurance company WPA announced the figures as findings of an independent research survey to identify the key factors contributing to medical inflation, which it said was at 20pc and rising.

The survey, among private hospitals, companies and the public, found that one hospital increased the cost of an operation from £6,500 to £9,000 when it learned that one patient was paying through health insurance.

Conservative MP for Harlow Jerry Hayes said, at the London conference where the findings were announced, that unless a brake was put on "gross overcharging", patients would flee a disintegrating private sector, to overburden a crumbling National Health Service.

WPA said it could help contain healthcare costs, with a new scheme

In return, it offered savings on premiums and a guarantee to hold down future rises to a figure below the current rate of medical inflation.

Mr Hayes, a member of the Commons select committee for health, said: "If private hospitals continue their greedy exploitation they may destroy the very sector they are in business to serve."

The Independent Healthcare Association, the representative body for the providers of independent health care, said many of the examples of apparent overcharging by independent hospitals were explained by the hospital concerned. Others were simply mistakes.

Rifkind defends rail safety spending record

Martin Strivens.

TRANSPORT Secretary Malcolm Rifkind yesterday defended the level of investment in safety on British Rail as police disclosed that more than 300 passengers were injured in the Cannon Street crash.

As BR's inquiry into Tuesday morning's accident continued, Mr Rifkind said he did not accept that economies had affected safety on the railway network.

It was initially announced that 248 people had been injured at Cannon Street when the 7.38am commuter train from Sevenoaks hit the buffers at platform three.

But yesterday City of London Police said they believed a number of people had left the station with minor injuries and sought medical aid later.

"There's no total figure . . . but it is believed to be over 300, said a spokeswoman.

The man who died in the accident has been named as Martin Strivens, 24, a computer operator from Orpington, Kent.

Of the 40 people detained overnight in various hospitals with more serious injuries, 25 were allowed home yesterday.

Mr Rifkind discussed the accident at a pre-arranged meeting yesterday with Labour transport spokesman John Prescott.

Later, Mr Prescott said he had expressed his "extreme concern about deteriorating safety on British Rail".

There had been an increase in the number of significant accidents, especially those involving buffers, said Mr Prescott, and concern was mounting about overcrowding on older trains.

Mr Rifkind said that while the inquiry was being carried out, it was too soon to reach any conclusions about the crash, but old stock was already being replaced.

Asked about financing, he said critics attacking reduced subsidies were, in fact, often referring to the subsidy in fares.

"So far as safety is concerned, there has never been any limitation at all and I am able to say quite categorically we have never refused nor would ever refuse any request from British Rail for expenditure required for safety reasons — that is of paramount importance."

BR's inquiry into the crash continues today when it is likely the driver of the Sevenoaks train will be interviewed for a second time.

He has been reported as saying the brakes on the 40-year-old train failed at the last minute.

Although his evidence is vital, the inquiry was also looking closely at how a seemingly slight impact on the buffers could lead to such crumbling of the carriages.

Six of the train's 10 carriages have been taken to a depot at Wimbledon for further inspection by the inquiry team.

Outcry over poor school reading levels

HEADS and local councils were yesterday told to improve the teaching of reading after a report said it was "less than satisfactory" in one in five primary schools.

Education Secretary Kenneth Clarke called the figure "deplorable" and made clear where he placed the blame.

His concern was heightened by a second report which indicated primary school reading standards declined in the late 1980s.

Mr Clarke said in a letter to councils and primary school heads: "I look to schools and to every local education authority to take a much more active and critical interest in reading standards in its own area than has apparently been the norm in recent years."

The two-pronged investigation into reading standards in English schools was ordered last July by former Education Secretary John MacGregor after a leaked report by education authority psychologists suggested the biggest fall in standards for 45 years.

They blamed the decline on new teaching methods such as the use of "real" books, where pupils memorise whole words instead of spelling them out phonetically.

Yesterday's report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of schools, which said teaching of reading was not good enough in 20pc of cases, followed visits to 120 primary schools and 3,000 earlier routine inspections.

It said: "In more of the schools heads need to develop clear, well-formulated policies which are subscribed to by the whole staff and which form the basis of a planned programme for reading."

The second study, from the National Foundation for Educational Research, was based on statistics from 26 local education authorities in England and Wales.

It said 9-year-olds in the late 1980s.

Mr Clarke told a London news conference it was unclear whether standards had declined. The HMI report indicated they were much as they had been 10 years ago.

He said: "Reading is the most fundamental skill children need to take best advantage of in their schooling.

"I am determined that we should achieve better standards. All schools should strive to match the standards of the best."

He promised regular monitoring of standards and advice for all schools on good teaching practices.

He said: "I also strongly urge all parents to find out about their children's reading standards and to participate in helping to improve them."

Labour education spokesman Jack Straw said the reports were a "deplorable indictment" of the Government's record.

National Union of Teachers general secretary Doug McAvoy called for a full-scale inquiry into reading standards.

National Association of Head Teachers general secretary David Hart said the figure for poor standards "in such a basic skill" was far too high.

Mother in emotional liver plea

A YOUNG mother made an emotional plea for a second liver transplant for her young daughter — who will die just a few days short of her second birthday unless another donor organ can be found.

Doctors at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge bought time for Belfast toddler Tamara Rainey by keeping her alive with a stop gap transplant operation 10 weeks ago.

They cut down a nine-year-old child's liver, but Tamara who will be two on February 2, has rejected the new organ.

Her mother Marina, 24, is at her bedside.

Child abuse list may grow

THE list of barred teachers may be extended to non-teaching staff in an effort to combat child abuse, schools Minister Michael Fallon said yesterday.

The "List 99" held at the Department of Education contains the names of around 1,500 teachers barred for sexual and other offences.

Mr Fallon was speaking at the launch in London of a Boarding Schools Helpline set up after a sex scandal at Berkshire private boarding school Crookham Court was exposed by the BBC's That's Life programme.

The six-month helpline will be operated by child abuse charity HelpLine and funded by grants of £25,000 from the Department of Education and £5,000 from the Independent Schools Joint Council.

Mr Fallon said: "We are now looking at certain categories of non-teaching staff, such as sports instructors, groundsmen and so on to put on the list."

His department had no evidence the problem was widespread but "we take it very seriously and this is why we are spending public money on this helpline

A special That's Life programme on Crookham Court will be screened on Sunday and includes a reconstruction of the trial which ended in school owner Philip Cadman and French teacher William Printer being jailed for 10 years and English teacher Anthony Edmonds for six years last July for sex offences against pupils.

She's the right shape for a Mini

Young Slimmer of the Year Lesley Godwin with her new car in the shadow of her former self.

LESLEY Godwin, who shed more than six stones after seeing "a video nasty" of herself, was yesterday named Young Slimmer of the Year.

Lesley, 29, from Loudwater, Buckinghamshire, who weighed more than 16 stone, used to gorge on up to 10 bars of chocolate a day.

But the former, self-confessed chocaholic is now a shapely 36-27-38 and weighs 10st 6lbs.

Lesley, who occasionally acts as assistant to husband Nigel's children's magician act, said a video from a children's party made her take up the battle of the bulge.

"I felt awful when I saw the video," said Lesley, who certainly did not look the part of her husband's glamorous assistant. "I was waddling along with about five chins — a big fat lump.

"The video was so nasty I decided there and then to lose weight."

Lesley, who has two children, wins a Mini, a family holiday in Florida and £500 cash.

She says she has gained pounds from her diet by saving about £15 a week on food bills.

Lesley decided to compete in Young Slimmer of the Year, organised by Slimmer magazine.

She joined her local slimmers' club and went on a 1,500 calorie controlled diet which later dropped to 1,200 calories when she neared her target weight.

Eksund trial accused await outcome

THE trial of four Irishmen allegedly involved in the Eksund arms haul ended in Paris last night with verdicts and sentences not due to be given until March 6.

Henry Cairns, Gabriel Cleary, James Doherty and James Coll are all charged with transporting arms, importing prohibited merchandise and using forged documents.

The coaster Eksund and its five-man crew were seized by French customs officers off the coast of Brittany in October 1987, when the huge arms haul worth £3.5m was found on board.

The arms allegedly came from Libya and were destined for the IRA.

The fifth crew member, skipper Adrian Hopkins, is awaiting trial in Dublin.

During yesterday's hearing at the Palais de Justice, French and Irish police were accused of agreeing a secret deal which allowed Hopkins to flee France.

He was released on bail by the French authorities last year before fleeing to Ireland.

Summing up for three of the defendants, Maitre Antoine Comte said: "You will not make the defence believe that the freeing of Hopkins and his flight from France was unknown to the DST (the French special branch, Direction de la Surveillance de Territoire).

The court has been trying Hopkins in his absence. On Tuesday the public prosecutor recommended he be given a six-year sentence.

The court heard the five Irishmen had no intention of bringing the weapons into France.

Maitre Comte is representing Cleary, from Tallaght, Co Dublin, Coll, of Fanad, and Doherty, of Gweedore, both Co Donegal.

Coll, Cleary and Doherty, described in court as IRA men, have been in custody in France since their arrest.

Cairns, of Bray, Co Wicklow, has been on bail.

The public prosecutor recommended earlier that Cairns be given a five-year sentence.

Regional News

Ten to face court

TEN people were yesterday charged in connection with raids at shops and warehouses where goods valued at nearly £23,000 were stolen.

The nine men and one woman were among 24 people arrested on Tuesday in connection with alleged raids which involve cars being used as rams.

Those charged yesterday are expected to appear at Gateshead Magistrates Court this morning.

The burglary and robbery charges relate to the alleged theft of £12,379 worth of goods in a burglary at Comet, Team Valley Trading Estate, Gateshead, on October 12; £3,870 of goods in a burglary at Provident Direct Supplies in Penshaw Way, Birtley, on November 23, and a robbery at the Co-op in Jackson Street, Gateshead, on September 19 when cigarettes and spirits worth £6,663 were stolen.

Marketing campaign brings city jobs boost

By BARBARA HENDERSON
Civic Affairs Correspondent

UP to 9,000 jobs could be created in Newcastle as a result of a major marketing campaign carried out by the city.

Around 85 firms from outside the North have made firm enquiries to Newcastle City council as a result of the authority's campaign carried out by London-based advertising agency J Walter Thompson.

News of the promised jobs bonanza was revealed at last night's full council meeting as the city discussed a report on economic development in Newcastle.

Coun David Slesenger, who chairs the city's development committee, revealed how the campaign — which cost the city £300,000 — had brought in the 85 inquiries in the last few months.

If all the offers came to fruition, 1.2 million sq ft of works premises would be needed, bringing in a possible £140m to the council, and creating up to 9,000 jobs.

After the meeting Coun Slesenger said: "Most of the inquiries had been from the financial sector, including a foreign bank who could create 2,000 jobs, and insurance and mortgage companies.

He added: "This has proved the case that professional marketing is needed if we are to achieve inward investment."

In his report on the city's economic development activity Coun Slesenger warned that around 15,000 people were still unemployed in Newcastle and that the creation of jobs had to be a top priority.

"Continuing improvements in the local economy has been secured recently with a number of key projects choosing Newcastle as their preferred business location, including British Airways, the AA, the Intervention Board of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Department of Social Security.

"I am convinced that inward investment will continue to be a major source of new jobs in Newcastle," he said.

Call for extra police

HUNDREDS of extra police officers are urgently needed to help stamp out racial harassment and abuse in the North, it was claimed last night.

The plea for extra policing came from Newcastle's Deputy Mayor Tom Marr as the city's full council discussed a survey of the fears of black and Asian people.

The survey, carried out over the summer by the city council, revealed 58pc of black people have experienced racial harassment, ranging from insults and threats to arson attacks and violence.

Asians and Afro-Caribbeans, many of whom experience racial abuse every day, are often afraid to go out and have had to invest in extra security for their homes.

The survey revealed 45pc of those questioned had had property damaged and 11pc had been physically assaulted.

Most of the violence occurs in Wingrove and Elswick and the survey also revealed that most of the offenders were white, male and under 24.

Presenting the report, Coun Mo O'Toole, who chairs the city's racial equality sub committee, said "this is a very disturbing report of the circumstances in which many people of this city have to live every day."

Coun O'Toole added she was "quite horrified".

The Citywide Survey interviewed 233 people from Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Chinese and African origins.

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