

vaccines, it is anticipated that they will have similar safety profiles, with serious adverse events after vaccination being uncommon. However, ongoing monitoring and further data are needed.

Influenza vaccine uptake<sup>7</sup> in the northern hemisphere has been poor even in the face of the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> The incorporation of the pandemic strain into the regular seasonal vaccine for the southern hemisphere requires a new focus on vaccination by health care providers who do not deal with the 'classic' risk groups (mostly the elderly and chronically ill) and who have little experience and lack awareness of the topic.

We urge public health officials to accelerate and intensify planning for the 2010 influenza season, and suggest:

- widespread and strategic informing of health care professionals – particularly those primarily involved in the care of pregnant women – on the importance of vaccinating pregnant women against influenza
- increasing efforts to improve influenza vaccine uptake by pregnant women by community-based information campaigns
- informing health care professionals on the need for timely diagnosis and immediate antiviral treatment of pregnant women with suspected influenza
- training and equipping all antenatal clinics to diagnose and treat women with symptoms of acute influenza.

Good uptake of the vaccination requires early action to ensure that health care workers are aware of the risks associated with H1N1 in pregnant women and their potential reluctance to be vaccinated. Given our scarce health care resources, our priority must be to keep pregnant women well and out of hospital. Vaccination is central to any prevention strategy, while neuramidase inhibitors may reduce the severity of disease, reducing the likelihood that women may need hospitalisation.

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## Medical electives in South Africa

**To the Editor:** I read with concern and interest the 'personal view' expressed by Matthew Kirkman,<sup>1</sup> a foreign elective student.

I deplore the actions of the surgeon described in this report – to the point that I suspect this would constitute negligence and patient abandonment, and feel that this should be reported to the management of the hospital concerned.

I also need to share my concern that this young person has an undue issue with aspects that he describes as of 'ethical concern'. Firstly, as a trainee registered with the HPCSA, he was working in a training hospital, to which patients are admitted knowing that students may interact with them; no specific 'consent', written or otherwise, was therefore required, as it was implied by presenting themselves for treatment. The patient would have consented to the procedure, including, it is to be hoped, being informed that an assistant is required by law, to assist in all surgical procedures. The law does *not* state the level of assistance required, except that it is to be a medical assistant (which could include student, intern, CSMO, GP or specialist).

Secondly, he appears to have an incorrect balance of the ethical concepts: his concern for autonomy of the patient should be more tempered with justice and beneficence – doing the right thing in the best interest of this patient (in this case the dressing). In bringing into the argument the issue of the extent of the informed consent, he has lost perspective on the place he was at, namely intra-operatively: the patient had already consented to the procedure – the law again does *not* dictate the 'who' and the 'how'; that is medical decision making. This also begs the issue of students needing patient assent for bedside procedures, which is given readily, when requested in a professional and dignified manner.

Admittedly, the student felt out of his depth, which I sympathise with, but I agree that he made the best decision under the circumstances. Ethical principles apply to the group in general, and are applied on an individual basis as the patient's need dictates.

Thirdly, ethical dilemmas are confronted by doctors every day. This does not mean that the decisions are easy, or that there will be a ready option in every case. The ethical issues must be balanced with their application to the culture of the region, which differs markedly across the world.

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