Health Headlines

Need a Light?
The need for a light is gone with the electronic cigarette, a battery-powered device which delivers a fine spray of nicotine without any flame or smoke. Unlike gum or patches, the device mimics the sensation of smoking and provides a cigarette fix in places where smoking is not allowed. Although the FDA has not approved them, a devoted fan base is using e-cigarettes to wean themselves off smoking. The replaceable cartridges contain various levels of nicotine - from none to 18 milligrams. Seemingly safer than the real thing, questions remain about their health risks and their effectiveness to help people quit smoking. (Los Angeles Times, 8.2.10) Read more about smoking and smoking-related diseases.

Prescription for Death
Washington state government is developing regulations to stop doctors from prescribing high doses of powerful painkillers for patients. The growing abuse of painkillers has led to a nationwide epidemic of overdose deaths. Cases of patients that go to their doctor for arthritis or lower back pain and die a few years later from drug overdoses exemplify that too many patients are getting drugs at dosages that are too high for too long. While many patients benefit from painkillers, studies show that others suffer side effects such as lethargy, increased sensitivity to pain, and potentially fatal overdoses. (The New York Times, 7.28.10) Read more about prescription drugs.

Rat Lungs Change the Future
Researchers at Yale University moved science a step further toward building new lungs - they took apart and re-grew a rat's lung, then transplanted it to an incubator-style container and watched it breathe. In the U.S. alone, nearly 400,000 people die of lung diseases each year and lung transplants are rare. The work will help find ways to regenerate damaged lungs, although it may still be 20 or 25 years before this approach is ready to be used on humans. (CBS News, 6.24.10) Read more about lung transplants and organ donation.

Coming Clean Prevents Lawsuits
When doctors make mistakes, admitting those mistakes to the patient, apologizing, and offering compensation may go a long way toward preventing malpractice lawsuits, new research shows. Faster resolution of disputes and lower legal costs overall are other benefits of coming clean. Although it makes sense that patients appreciate when health workers take responsibility for errors and deal with them sincerely and honestly, this can be difficult in fragmented health care systems where errors usually aren't caused by just one person. (BusinessWeek, 8.17.10) Read more about medical errors.

Funding Agency News

A Serving of Folic Acid
Studies show that adequate consumption of folic acid one month before and during the first trimester of pregnancy can prevent up to 50% - 70% of neural tube defects (NTDs), such as anencephaly and spina bifida. As a result, the FDA mandated that all food products made from enriched cereal grain flours be fortified with folic acid. This has reduced the number of NTDs in the U.S. by more than 30%. There are still many populations worldwide that can benefit from these fortification programs to prevent NTDs. (CDC, 2.18.10) Read the press release and more about folic acid.

Tackling Worldwide Child Mortality
Millions of children under five are dying from preventable diseases each year. Child mortality is a key indicator of a nation's health and development, reflecting economic, cultural, and geographic barriers. Half of all child deaths occur in Africa and 42% in Asia. The UN's Millennium Development Goals identified child mortality, maternal health and infectious diseases as three of the eight top priorities for the world. Efforts to increase access to vaccines, clean water, and better nutrition will benefit the health of children around the world. (CDC, 7.15.10) Read the press release and more about maternal and child health.

Men of Color Have Poor Outcomes
African-American and Latino boys and young men are much more likely to experience poor health outcomes than white boys and young men, new research shows. Boys and young men of color exhibit higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and homicide death rates. Most of these differences are directly related to the neighborhoods where they grow up, their schools, and unhealthy environments where systematic reform is needed. (The California Endowment, 6.30.10) Read the press release.

Real People, Real Lives

The Gym Can Give You More Than Exercise
Kyle Frey, a junior and competitive wrestler at Drexel University, noticed a pimple on his arm. He didn't think much of it until the next morning when it had grown to the size of his bicep. He learned he had Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA), the potentially deadly infection that is resistant to most antibiotics. Skin infections in athletes are extremely common, with sweat, abrasions, and direct or indirect contact with other's bodily fluids causing an athlete’s skin to be vulnerable to a host of problems. Cleaning equipment after a workout, showering with antibacterial soap, and putting on clean clothes can help prevent skin infections. (The New York Times, 8.2.10) Read more about MRSA infections.

Fifteen-year-old Saves Seven Lives
When 15-year-old Colbey Oglesby died in a car accident, her mother did not hesitate to donate her daughter's organs. Colbey told her mother she wanted to become an organ donor, and that decision helped save seven lives. Her lungs went to a woman who later was able to run three 5k races, climb a mountain, and win medals for swimming. Her heart went to a woman who was near death with congestive heart failure. More than 100,000 people are waiting for donor organs in the U.S., which is more than 10 times the number of deceased organ donors in an average year. (The New York Times, 8.16.10) Read more about organ donation.

Boys Get HPV Vaccine, Too
Tonya McKinney couldn't wait to get her children vaccinated against the human papilloma virus (HPV). Her daughter, Lauren, age 12, got the shot, and Tonya wanted it for her 15-year old son, Alex, too. Although the HPV vaccine was not yet endorsed for boys, she remained patient until the vaccine became available. Alex was the first male patient to get the HPV vaccine, now recommended for both girls and boys, ideally before they become sexually active. There are over 30 strains of HPV that affect more than 75% of the population and can lead to genital warts and cervical cancer. (Daily Press, 8.13.10) Read more about HPV and cervical cancer.

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