

TOP ISSUES

THE POLITICAL YEAR THAT WAS



10 RACGP ELECTION

OCTOBER saw the ushering in of a new president for the RACGP after Sydney GP and incumbent college vice-president Dr Liz Marles defeated Perth GP Dr Mike Civil in a tough election.

With the federal government's continued health reforms, including the rollout of Medicare Locals, the launch of the PCEHR and significant changes to after-hours funding, Dr Marles takes the reins at a fascinating and challenging time for the profession. She was officially sworn in at the RACGP's annual conference held on the Gold Coast last month.

The presidential election was the first for the college since Dr Chris Mitchell's win over sitting president Dr Vasantha Preetham in 2008.



9 IMG SUPERVISION

THE issue of adequate support and supervision for IMGs remains a hot issue, despite the announcement that the federal government is to launch a new program that aims to provide consistent support and advice to IMGs working under supervision in rural Australia.

With scant detail available about the program at the time of press, a pair of recently published

surveys indicated many IMGs felt inadequately supported and unsatisfied in their positions.

Along with a paper published in the MJA indicating IMGs were more likely than their Australian-trained colleagues to be the subject of complaints to medical boards and to have adverse findings against them, the surveys led to recent calls for an embargo on the importation of IMGs until adequate supports could be guaranteed.



8 DR PHILIP NITSCHKE

EARLIER this month right-to-die advocate Dr Philip Nitschke became subject to his second AHPRA investigation in the space of a year after an anti-euthanasia lobbyist lodged a complaint questioning the GP's standing as a "fit and proper person" to hold medical registration due to his advocacy of various euthanasia methods.

The AMA has questioned the investigation's premise, arguing that Dr Nitschke's political beliefs should not affect his medical registration.



7 PSR

THE PSR has continued its comeback after a lengthy shutdown following the forced resignation of all panellists in late 2010.

New panels were appointed in 2012 to review new cases. However the shutdown did appear to impact on Medicare's bottom line.

The PSR's annual report, released earlier this month, indicated the break – which lasted some 16 months – contributed to a \$1 million drop in MBS funds ordered to be repaid by medical practitioners compared to the previous year's figures.



6 UNIVERSAL MEDICINE

ALTERNATIVE therapy group Universal Medicine, led by former tennis coach Serge Benhayon, has this year been accused of – among other things – promoting the group's powers to prevent cancer with treatments including "esoteric breast massage" and ovarian "readings".

One MO report led to a TGA investigation which stopped the organisation selling its untested products online, while a series of complaints to the Health Care Complaints Commission have resulted in an AHPRA investigation, which remains ongoing.

Universal has denied wrongdoing throughout.



5 DOCTORS IN THE FIRING LINE

DOCTORS caught up in political unrest, particularly in Bahrain and Syria, have suffered violence and persecution for the supposed crime of aiding "enemies of the state" by treating anti-government demonstrators.

Following a string of horror stories recounting the ordeals faced by doctors, an Australian-led plan to protect hospitals and medical professionals dealing with civil war casualties in Syria has this month garnered the support of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.



4 INTERN PLACES

AFTER an initial forecast predicted a shortfall of around 180 local intern places for international students graduating from Australian medical schools, debate has raged over who should fund the shortfall to ensure the graduates are able to complete their medical training.

At the time of press the federal government had reached an agreement with the WA, Queensland and both territory governments that will see 116 of the places covered. However, the remaining states have shown no sign that they will pick up the remainder.

With some 60-plus places left outstanding, doctor and student group leaders were calling for a systemic solution to ensure the same problem does not occur again in 2013.



3 SUPER CLINICS

2012 was another hit-and-miss year for the government's controversial GP super clinics initiative.

Despite some completed super clinics now operational and thriving – such as the Palmerston GP super clinic in Darwin – ongoing woes have been caused by other projects such as Brisbane's \$15 million Redcliffe super clinic, which is yet to open after five years and was this month taken over by Queensland Health.

Meanwhile an internal evaluation of the super clinics scheme appeared to support criticisms by doctors' groups that current MBS item rebates are not high enough to maintain a viable business model. The same report also indicated that one in six of the super clinic projects failed to meet the government's own definition of "value for money".



2 MEDICARE LOCALS

AFTER the government's budget decision to axe Practice Incentive Program payments for after-hours care and instead hand administration of after-hours funding over to individual Medicare Locals, peak GP groups complained the measure would jeopardise successful existing roster arrangements.

With the change due to come into effect from July next year, MO understands at least two metropolitan MLs plan to use the exact same modelling as Medicare to determine how much to give practices for after-hours service delivery.

However with the arrangements ultimately decided by each individual ML, questions remain over how existing services will be maintained or matched nationwide.



1 E-HEALTH

AFTER a controversy-marred build-up, the federal government's Personally Controlled e-Health Records system launched on 1 July with little fanfare or functionality.

After much lobbying by peak doctors' groups, the government finally agreed to allow GPs working on establishing the electronic records to bill Medicare for their time. However, with just 17,152 patient records established – as of 16 November – the impact of the initiative is yet to reach anything approaching the system's 500,000 sign-up capacity.

Meanwhile, the government's decision to limit rebates for telehealth consultations to locations deemed remote enough has been slammed by a number of now ineligible GPs, who have argued the scheme would provide significant benefit to their less well-off patients.

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OF 2012

THE CLINICAL YEAR THAT WAS

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RU486

EMOTIONAL debate and desperate politicking have surrounded the abortifacient mifepristone, or RU486, for decades but a milestone was reached this year when it was finally registered by the TGA.

After six years of restricted availability through the Authorised Prescriber Scheme, Mifepristone Linepharma and GyMiso (misoprostol) were freed up in August, becoming available to any prescriber trained by the sponsor, Marie Stopes International Australia (MSIA).

Earlier in the year Australia's first death related to mifepristone medical abortion was revealed. However, a study of >13,000 MSIA clients published in August showed an overall favourable safety profile.



SUGAR

FEW issues in the obesity debate are as fraught by factional expert opinion as the role of fructose.

The sugar wars continued this year, kicked off anew by economist Rory Robertson, who claimed increasing sugar consumption is fuelling fatness, and glycaemic index (GI) warriors Jennie Brand-Miller and Alan Barclay have it all wrong.

The so-called GI crew have described an "Australian paradox", claiming sugar intake is declining while waistlines are expanding. In an opinion piece for *MO* in August they cited reviews finding no effect of fructose on weight.

However, the pendulum continues to swing, with analysis of data from more than 33,000 people in September "cementing" the role of sugar-sweetened drinks in the obesity epidemic, according to Harvard research.



FAULTY DEVICES

WITH the DePuy metal-on-metal hip implants and the PIP rupturing breast implants scandals still fresh in the mind, in March the TGA was forced to defend its handling of medical device faults and failures as University of Sydney researchers published a damning analysis.

One in every two incidents reported to the TGA were never investigated, it found. In the past decade poor devices were linked to 295 patient deaths and 2357 serious injuries. The TGA promised reform and transparency.



PERTUSSIS

THE so-called cocooning strategy – offering free vaccination for parents and carers of newborn babies too young to be vaccinated

– was abandoned midyear in the face of a waning epidemic and doubts about its efficacy.

Antenatal vaccination is now advocated by the US and the UK but Australian immunisation experts say there's little data on its safety or immunogenicity.

The draft 10th *Australian Immunisation Handbook*, due to be finalised in 2013, says the vaccine can be given in the third trimester.



VITAMIN D

ARE we getting too hung up about vitamin D deficiency? A group of NZ endocrinologists put their heads above the parapet in November, questioning calls for broader testing and supplementation and suggesting guidelines just leave doctors confused given the different interpretations of the same data.

But the year has been punctuated by paper after paper providing evidence for vitamin D's influence on health, ranging from obesity to better motor skills in developing children.

A new position statement was issued in June, calling for the allowance of a winter drop in levels when assessing status.



KIDS' CHECK

GOVERNMENT plans to introduce an "emotional wellbeing" check for Australia's three-year-olds was condemned as a waste of time or worse, carrying the threat of overdiagnosis.

A leading US DSM-IV psychiatrist however was rebuked when he linked the \$11 million scheme to "Australia's infatuation with untested prevention models".

Some GPs declared they would not do the checks. In an *MO* poll, two-thirds of GPs opposed the check, with 41% saying it was a waste of money.



ANTICOAGULANTS

PRODUCT familiarisation programs sprouted this year as sponsors of novel oral anticoagulants jockeyed for market position despite a pending government-ordered review of the costly and controversial agents.

The Sansom review started taking submissions, attracting broad consensus that current management of atrial fibrillation (AF) could be improved.

In July, a discussion paper from the review setting out the options floated a curb on usage until more was known about safety.

Later in the year, fresh evidence on gastrointestinal and intracranial bleeding safety was proffered by dabigatran's manufacturer and the US Food and Drug Administration.

The review is due to report by year's end.



MORE PBAC DEFERRALS

MASSIVE leakage under the PBS is fuelling concern subsidies for anti-dementia drugs will be cut. But the campaign to preserve access to the medications, driven by Alzheimer's Australia, was just one of several involving patient, doctor and pharmaceutical lobbies this year as various drug listings were delayed, restricted or rejected.

In March, infectious diseases physicians expressed frustration that new protease inhibitors holding promise for nonresponders to traditional hepatitis C therapy were deferred and the drugs, boceprevir and telaprevir, were overlooked again in October.

But despite PBAC concern that pregabalin (Lyrica), a drug for neuropathic pain, had huge potential for leakage, it was eventually listed following a petition with 10,000 signatures.



SCREENING

DOCTORS are taking sides and the public is going to get much more confused before this debate is over: Is screening for disease doing more harm than good?

In February, former members of the US Preventive Services Task Force noted concern about overdiagnosis had spread from professional journals to the lay arena, with PSA testing and mammography coming under increasing scrutiny.

In October, there were calls for a review of routine mammography in asymptomatic women, but other experts soon stumped up research showing the risk of overdiagnosis among women participating in BreastScreen was low, at no more than 2%.

But *MO* uncovered broad support for screening for diabetes in a national poll of GPs, with 77% saying it was warranted.



PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS

ABUSE by doctor-shoppers and addiction among chronic pain patients sparked calls for action this year.

RACGP chair of quality care Dr Evan Ackermann noted in June improved drugs likely increased doctors' willingness to prescribe and this was bolstered by canny marketing.

A report in October showing rising accidental opioid overdoses underscored the need for real-time script history software DORA, experts said, while there was also a call for SIP-style remuneration.

Acknowledging GPs were caught between concern for patients in pain and dismay at abuse, Dr Ackermann called on colleagues to take responsibility. "It's on our turf," he said. 