News Roundup

Compiled by Tom Moloney

RCSI Launches MyHealth app
The Royal College of Surgeons has launched a new app. It has verified professional information on 800 specific health conditions. It lists contact details for emergency services, hospitals and organisations such as Diabetes Ireland and the Irish Cancer Society. It also lists the number of day's stock of the different blood groups held by the IBTS. In addition there are links to health news sources such as BBC Medical News.

HPV Test May Replace Pap Smear
CervicalCheck may be the first screening programme in the world to switch to using HPV DNA testing instead of the conventional Pap smear according to IMT. HIQA is to arrange a health technology assessment to assess the clinical and cost effectiveness of the switch.

Ireland 1950 vs 2015
Figures quoted by Fintan O’Toole in the Irish Times on how we lived in 1950 give us cause to reflect on how good things are now, despite all the cut-backs.
- 4,500 students sat the Leaving Certificate.
- The total number of students in University was 7,900.
- Only 255,000 homes had flush toilets.
- More than 80% on households had no piped water supply.
- There were 43,000 phone lines, one third were domestic.
- Less than a third of households had more than 4 rooms to live in while families were large.
- The total output of Irish broadcasting was 7 hours radio a day.
- Male life expectancy at birth was less than 65.
- Infant mortality was 100 times higher than now.

Plans to Deal with Deficit in Blood Bank Pension Scheme
By the end of last year the IBTS pension scheme had a deficit of €32 million. Negotiations have been ongoing for over 13 years between management and staff to resolve the ever increasing deficit according to the Irish Times. Proposed changes in pension arrangements have emerged from a conciliation conference at the Workplace Relations Commission. If staff sign up to revised arrangements the Government may contribute funds towards reducing the deficit. The pension scheme has already been modified for new entrants after May, 2003. Reduced demand for blood and platelets has caused a fall of €21 million in income since 2009. The CEO of the Irish Blood Transfusion Service has
said that the cost of the organisation’s pension scheme is threatening the standard of its service.

Hospital CEO’s Salaries Capped
According to the Irish Times CEOs appointed in the future to run the country’s main hospitals will receive significantly reduced salaries. The Government has decided that no more than €121,600 per year on a five-year contract, a reduction of nearly €16,000 less than the current salary. There will be proportionate reductions in the CEO’s salaries of smaller units.

Crisis in CEO Recruitment in UK
UK Trusts are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain CEOs. The average tenure in office is only 2.5 years. Five per cent announced their retirement during the summer.

Beacon Hospital Introduces Term-Time Working
The Beacon Hospital in Dublin is introducing a policy which allows staff to take up to 13 weeks off per year to spend time with children during school holidays.

Why Medicine Often Has Dangerous Side Effects for Women
Over 80% of the drugs withdrawn from the market are due to side effects on women. Testing of drugs is almost entirely made on males both animal and human. The strategy, dating from the 1940s, arises from a reluctance to expose women of child-bearing age in medical trials. At that time it was believed that men and women were similar. But over the decades it has been realised that they are different; “women are not just men with boobs and tubes”.

Heart attacks in women present with different symptoms to men. Aspirin is useful for treating men to prevent heart attacks but is harmful in women for example. We now know that the X chromosome remains active in every cell in the body. This could explain the differences we see in the dosing of drugs, or why there are differences between men and women in the susceptibility and severity of diseases.

We need to change the way we treat men and women: research is required according to Dr Alyson McGregor in a Ted talk with the above title.

Sweden is Shifting to a 6-Hour Day
Sweden is moving towards a standard 6-hour working day, according to a recent study. In Scantelear, employers have introduced a 6-hour working day in order to lower the number of sickness reports and increase productivity. Staff are encouraged to stay at work and avoid distractions, as well as reduce the number of meetings.

A recent study in the Lancet indicated those who clock up a 55-hour week will have a 30% greater risk of having a stroke than those who maintain a 35- to 40-hour week.

Debate on Suitability of English Language Test for EEA Nurses in UK
From next January nurses from the European Economic Area will have to undergo an English language test in the UK as it is required now for non-EEA staff. There is criticism of the proposed test in that it is said to assess academic knowledge of English and does not demonstrate competence in a clinical setting.

Standards for UK Healthcare Assistants (HCAs) who Administer Vaccinations
Updated standards have been updated in the UK for HCAs to facilitate a greater role for them in administering vaccines.

NHS Clinic emails Identities of HIV Patients in Error
This breach of confidentiality is a lesson to all who send emails. The Dean Street clinic in London sent a newsletter to 800 HIV patients on a group email, rather than to individuals. Recipients were able to read the names of all on the mailing list.

UK U-turn on Safe Staffing
Following concerns about nurse staff levels in Trusts that have had adverse reports on patient care the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence developed guidance on safe staffing. These were to be published last July. However, under pressure from the Department of Health they have decided not to publish. The data will, it is claimed, be included in a broader study by NHS England.

Staff Guilty of Manslaughter-Prosecutions More Frequent
A nurse at Leicester Royal Infirmary had been found guilty of manslaughter by gross negligence. This followed a 4-week trial following the death of a 6-year-old child. A doctor was also convicted and a ward sister was cleared. It was claimed they failed to recognise that the boy had gone into septic shock and that record-keeping of the boy’s vital signs was woefully inaccurate.

Former surgeon, David Sells, was found guilty of gross negligence manslaughter in 2013 and jailed over the death of 67-year-old James Joseph Hughes, who died three days after developing a life-threatening condition, whilst in hospital, in February 2010.

Elizabeth Joslin, a specialist lawyer for the Crown Prosecution Service, said: ‘James Joseph Hughes was in
hospital for knee surgery when he, by chance, suffered a perforated bowel.

“David Sellu’s lack of care fell far below the expected standard, with terrible consequences.

Prosecution of doctors for gross negligence manslaughter is rare and the threshold for criminal prosecution is high, but this doctor’s actions were not mistakes or errors of judgment, but negligence so serious that he has now been convicted of a criminal offence.

The number of doctors charged with manslaughter has increased sharply since the 1990s as more families push for legal action following the death of a loved one.

But despite the increase in charges being brought, the conviction rate has remained low, at about 30 per cent.

Researchers have warned that it will be become harder to maintain an open culture where medical mistakes are reported in the future if individual doctors continue to be singled out by grieving relatives.

A study published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine found that 85 doctors in the United Kingdom had been charged with manslaughter between 1995 and the end of last year. Three had pleading guilty, 22 were convicted and 60 were acquitted.

Thirty eight (45 per cent) of the charges against doctors had been brought since 1990. Dr Robin Ferner, from Birmingham’s City Hospital, said: “The number of doctors charged with manslaughter has risen steeply since the beginning of the 1990s. However, the rate of conviction remains low.

“The evidence suggests that doctors are being charged for reasons of vengeance or retribution, rather than to protect patients.”

It was appropriate to charge doctors where there had been a clear violation or deliberate deviation from safe practice, but human error was unavoidable, he said.

Threats of prosecution would be likely to mean faults going unreported and more patients losing their lives.

“Prosecuting doctors who make errors increases the number of ruined careers, but vilification of individuals does not lead to safer health systems,” Dr Ferner added.

Ian Barker, a solicitor with the Medical Defence Union, said prosecutors needed to take a considered view based on expert opinion when considering charges against doctors.

He said: "In a lot of cases, you are not just seeing elements of human errors, but also systems failure. One wonders if you are fixing the problem by prosecuting individuals.”

US Doctors Jailed for Accepting Bribes

In the past year Dark Daily reports that US federal courts have sentenced 13 doctors to jail terms ranging from 12 to 63 months for accepting bribes from a medical laboratory company to defraud the Medicare programme. The fraud involved $100 million in payment to the laboratory.

Increase in Numbers of Nurse Prescribers in UK

The number of nurses in the UK who hold a prescribing qualification has grown over the past decade. There are almost 72,000 now. About half have full access to the same range of drugs as doctors and half have access to a limited formulary.

In Retrospect NHS Private Finance Initiative (PFI) Was Bad Value

With the aim of shifting large health capital projects out of government borrowing figures the UK government developed PFI schemes between 1997 and 2010. Funding was provided to build new hospitals by private investor companies. The bill for current year repayments will be £2 billion according to the Telegraph. These bills are repayable over 25-30 years and reviews have indicated the borrowing costs would have been lower if financed by the government. The scheme financed £11.8 billion in building hospitals in England but will cost £7.9 billion over 31 years. Of concern is that with trends away from treating patients in acute hospitals there will be surplus building stock in the coming years.

NHS Released Data on 700 000 Patients Without Permission

Dark Daily has summarised UK media stories that the NHS released data on 700,000 patients who opted out of a new centralised medical database. The information was shared with organisations and companies. This comes on top of an admission that 13 years of hospital data covering 47 million patients was sold to the insurance industry last year.

Working Long Hours Makes You Less Productive

According to sciencealert.com a review of the literature in the Harvard Business Review found no evidence that working for longer increases productivity. Indeed there is a lot of evidence that demonstrates the opposite. Long hours increase stress and burnout, and contributes to a range of health problems including a higher risk of stroke. This is not a new finding. Studies in the 1980s found that introducing an 8-hour day increased worker output.

Registration Fees Increased in UK

Following parliamentary approval the Health and Care Professions Council in the UK has increased the annual renewal fee for registrants to £30. This is an increase of £10. The fee for international applicants increases to £495.

Giant Virus Found in Frozen Siberian Wilderness
It sounds like the plot for a disaster movie. Sciencealert.com reports that researchers are reanimating a 30,000-year-old prehistoric virus found deep underground in the frozen wilderness of Siberia. It is a giant virus, longer than half a micron, and visible by light microscopy. The researchers say they will only revive the virus if they are certain it poses no threat to us! Let us hope they are right. The fact that viruses retain their infectivity in prehistorical permafrost should be of concern in the context of global warming they warn.

It is Expensive to Train Medical Staff

A speaker at a HSJ seminar estimated that it costs £750,000 to train a consultant and £50,000 to train a nurse in the UK. Assuming similar costs in Ireland, the country is losing a major investment as staff choose to emigrate.

Highlights from Canadian Conference on Innovation

Robert Michel from Dark Daily reported from Ontario on a national conference on innovation:
- Tighter budgets have reduced training budgets and as a result there are less laboratory professionals being produced resulting in shortages.
- Academic institutions are encountering difficulties in finding laboratories that will provide hands-on training.
- The expected crisis caused by the baby boomer generation retiring has been mitigated by the numbers remaining in post in part-time positions.
- Mass spectrometry and MALDI-TOF for infectious disease screening are shortening the time to answers for clinicians while also providing more precise information to guide therapeutic decisions.
- One laboratory network is using telepathology as a way to handle frozen sections in the different hospitals in the network, some as much as 400 miles away. This has been extended to routine Histopatology. But glass slides and microscopes still make up 60% of the work handled by Pathologists.

Ireland Struggling to Recruit Senior Health Personnel

As money flows back into the health system health agencies are struggling to recruit senior medical and nursing staff. The Irish Times reports. Up to 250 consultant post are vacant. Approximately 258 theatre nurse posts are vacant.

Contract for New Laboratory Information System Awarded

The HSE has announced that Cerner, a multinational health care technology company, has been awarded the contract for a national laboratory information system. The National MedLis project will involve the replacement of all hospital laboratory systems over the next 4 years on a phased basis. The project is due for completion in 2019. Forty three laboratories are involved.

Making Sense of Screening

Sense about Science has released a new edition of Making Sense of Screening. Misconceptions about how screening works continue to be perpetuated by media stories and high profile cases with campaigners and celebrities calling for more screening for more diseases. Experts explain how there are positives and negatives to screening.

US Business Man Increases Cost of Drug

A biotech company founded by a former hedge fund manager recently purchased the rights to a critical drug used in the treatment of toxoplasmosis and increased prices by 5,000% overnight. The cost per pill goes from $13.50 to $750. "We need to turn a profit on the drug" he said according to sciencealert.com. The action has prompted American politicians to discuss greater regulation of the drug manufacturing industry.

Demonstrating Personal Proficiency in Pathology

The RCPath, ACB and the IBMS have issued a joint position statement on this issue. The registration bodies require laboratory professionals to maintain proficiency. There is no single way to do this. The detailed document identifies a range of examples of how to do it.

Flexible Working Year for HSE Staff

From next year HSE staff will be able to avail of a facility for a shorter working year. It will permit staff to balance working arrangements with commitments such as school holidays. Special leave is available as a period of 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, or 13 weeks.

MLSA Out-of-Hours Survey

The MLSA is currently conducting a survey of its members views and attitudes towards 'out-of-hours' working focusing in particular on members current views of working on-call and at weekends as well as their views on any potential move to any shift working type model of service delivery. The survey is available at www.mlsa.ie

New Guidelines on Blood Pressure Targets
"Unexpected results from a major US clinical trial will mean thousands of Irish patients with hypertension will benefit from having their blood pressure more tightly controlled," says Dr Murie Houston in the Irish Times. For many years a target of 140/90 has been considered the upper limit of normal for blood pressure. This new research will likely result in a new goal of 120/80 for those with a history of heart disease or whose 10-year risk of suffering a heart attack or stroke is greater than 15%. This will lead to more aggressive treatment.

**Few Nurses Attracted Back to Ireland by HSE Scheme**

A package of benefits designed to attract Irish nurses working abroad to return to Ireland has only attracted 77 nurses who have taken up posts. There is a worldwide shortage of nurses. Salaries and, in particular conditions in which nurses are required to work in overcrowded hospitals, have made Ireland unattractive. The INMO, the union representing nurses, estimates we need to recruit more than 4,000 nurses to return staff levels to those pertaining prior to the recession.

**Alleged Intimidation of Doctor in Tallaght-Minister Orders Inquiry**

The Minister for Health has instructed Tallaght Hospital to investigate allegations of intimidation of a whistle-blower doctor advocating for patients in the overcrowded emergency department the Irish Times reports.

**Further Extension of Scope for Pharmacists**

New regulations signed by the Minister for Health will allow Pharmacists to administer a wider range of vaccines. On top of the flu vaccine, which they have been able to administer since 2011, they may now administer single- and pneumococcal vaccines.

**New Staff Grade Suggested for OTs**

The Minister for Health has asked the HSE to examine the introduction of a new grade, to be known as "theatre assistants", to alleviate shortages in theatre staffing. There are more than 250 theatre staff nurse posts vacant in Irish hospitals according to INMO.

**Identifying Cancer From a Single Drop of Blood**

Science Alert reports that researchers in Sweden have had promising results testing for RNA in platelets in a drop of blood. They claimed to have identified cancer with 98% accuracy.

**Lord Carter to Produce Guidance on Nurse Staffing Levels**

Lord Carter, the author of a number of reports on Pathology, has told HSJ that he will establish clear guidance on safe staffing levels in nursing in England as part of his study on NHS efficiency. He plans to publish a safe range of staffing levels.

Staffing guidance has been controversial. A report from NICE was suppressed by Government before publication. Staffing has been identified as a critical factor in a number of patient care scandals.

He has been working on opportunities for savings in workforce management, medicines, estates and procurement with 32 Trusts. Carter has estimated that £5 billion can potentially be saved in the acute sector.

**In search of the Perfect Health System**

Six years ago Mark Britnell began an extensive search for the perfect health system and he now has published his findings. Mark is a senior adviser with KPMG and has had extensive management experience in healthcare. He has visited 60 countries. No one country has a perfect system but there are examples of great healthcare around the world, he said.

He concludes that any system that primarily bases its healthcare on competition will end up paying a lot more for three services. While everyone cites the US in this context, high performing European countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands are now spending 2.5% of GDP more than the UK and they are not getting much more out of their systems. A system based on market forces will lead to much higher costs. But there is a role for judicious use of competition.

It takes a decade to implement real and sustained change in the healthcare system though some have done it in 7 years, many have taken 12 years.

The NHS could learn from a number of non-European countries. South Korea is impressive and introduced a universal healthcare system in 12 years. Singapore drew on the best examples from around the world. It has some of the best outcomes in the world and yet spends only 4.9% GDP on health. Israel is the only country where talk of a primary care led system is reality.