In brief

School nurses in Northern Ireland have launched a campaign to be regraded because they claim the current structure is 'grossly unfair'. Most are employed on grade E, while in the rest of the UK school nurses are mostly on grade F and some on grade G.

Adult patients with haemophilia should receive recombinant clotting factor concentrate, a genetically produced blood product, to remove the risk of infection. RCN haemophilia nurses association chair Vicky Vidler made the plea as some patients started a 'treatment strike' after it was revealed that a person infected with vCJD had donated blood.

The government this week has relaunched its advertising campaign aimed at attracting nurses and other healthcare professionals back into the NHS. The £4 million campaign, which will run until the middle of next month, will use the same adverts as last year. They feature 'Joe', a boy injured in a road accident and cared for by a team of professionals.

A website that encourages inactive people to take up walking as a hobby for their health has been launched by the British Heart Foundation and the Countryside Agency. The Walking Way to Health Initiative is supported by the government's New Opportunities Fund, which distributes National Lottery money. For information visit www.whi.org.uk.

Kids keep it zipped

Schoolchildren across the UK helped raise funds for Macmillan Cancer Relief last week by taking part in a sponsored silence. The Hold Your Tongue Challenge is also being supported by youth groups such as the Brownies and cub scouts.

Senior adviser claims riluzole ruling is 'not a reflection of the evidence base'

Challenge to NICE decision on motor neurone drug

By Nick Lipley

THE GROUP set up by ministers to decide which treatments are clinically and cost-effective has been accused of deceiving the public by one of its senior advisers.

Amanda Burls led the academic review team that looked at riluzole, a treatment for one form of motor neurone disease, on behalf of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

But the NICE ruling that followed was 'not a reflection of the evidence base', she said.

Speaking at a conference organised by Birmingham University's healthcare management centre last week, Dr Burls said there was no evidence the drug had any positive effect on quality of life or the 'functional status' of patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

'There remains considerable uncertainty as to the true benefit of riluzole,' she said.

But in his ruling on the efficacy of the treatment, NICE chief executive Andrew Dillon described it as 'important and worthwhile' and 'clinically and cost-effective'.

Dr Burls suggested the ruling had been made because the cost to the NHS was low and it offered hope, if not proven clinical help, to patients. This had been the basis of an appeal to NICE by the Motor Neurone Disease Association.

Calling the move a 'distortion' of the evidence, Dr Burls added: 'This is entirely inappropriate. It's not fair to patients. They ought to have the true data.'

Responding to Dr Burls' comments, Mr Dillon said: 'The institute's guidance on the use of riluzole for motor neurone disease is based entirely on the evidence with which it was presented. The decision has been welcomed by patients and professionals, and the institute stands by it completely. Dr Burls is entitled to her own opinion about the guidance and the decision-making process.'

Meanwhile, politicians from all three main political parties attacked ministers in the Commons over the length of time it is taking NICE to decide whether the NHS should provide beta interferons for people with multiple sclerosis. Health minister John Denham said the decision should be published by November.

Grade B salary lures staff back

FORMER NURSES are being enticed back to work by the promise of grade B salaries while they update their practice.

The return-to-practice course in Leicestershire has always been free, but now ex-nurses who enrol on the 16-week course are being paid, pro rata, £12,000 a year. Those with dependants receive an additional allowance.

More than 100 general and district nurses who have had career breaks of five years or more have already returned to the NHS in the county since the introduction of a return to work scheme.

But government figures show there could be 3,000 nurses in Leicestershire alone who have abandoned the profession.

RCN education adviser Sue Howard welcomed the initiative. 'Quite a lot of people say: "We want to come back but we can't afford to come back." It's about trust being as flexible as possible.'