USA news round-up

The old saying is that if Wall Street catches a cold, the City of London develops pneumonia. Not always true in dentistry with our two very different healthcare systems, but ideas, materials and techniques do cross the Atlantic. Many news stories from the USA also have echoes in the UK, so here are some that caught the editor’s eye.

Grey health
A study by Tefen USA, a management consulting company, warns that ‘the approaching onslaught’ of more than 70 million aging baby boomers could ‘overwhelm’ the USA health care system and engulf the economy. A recent report from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) predicts that US health care spending will double to just over $4.5 trillion by 2017, nearly 20 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product. Tefen warns that CMS’ projection could actually be too low because people over 65 face nearly three times as many hospital days per thousand as the general population, and 62 percent of 50-to-64-year-olds have at least one of six chronic health conditions: arthritis, high cholesterol, cancer, diabetes, heart disease and hypertension.

Oral Cancer
Approximately 35,000 Americans are diagnosed with oral cancer each year and nearly 8,000 people died of these cancers in 2007 alone. Early detection is an integral part in battling the disease and can even help identify precancerous cells before they become cancerous. The Pennsylvania Dental Association (PDA) stresses that regular dental checkups play an essential part in the early detection of oral cancer.

No laughing matter
A Long Island dentist has been arrested for inhaling laughing gas (nitrous oxide) for non-medical reasons. Police arrested Dr Norman Rubin and charged him with inhalation of hazardous inhalants, a misdemeanor. They were called to Rubin’s office by a patient who found the dentist in apparent distress. Police and emergency medical technicians learned that Rubin had been inhaling nitrous oxide. After being treated, he was arrested.

Independent hygienists
Dental hygienists in the USA may secure right to operate independently. The New Hampshire and Maine state legislatures are considering whether dental hygienists should be allowed to set up their own practices, or at least operate with more autonomy. However retired dentist Ray Jarvis of Rye, secretary of the New Hampshire Board of Dental Examiners, said the board is opposed to any legislation that would let hygienists establish private practices. Jarvis said hygienists must work under dental supervision so serious oral diseases are not missed.

Shop and bleach
Regulators in the States are looking into business that set up in shopping malls and offer tooth whitening. Many not only sell the products but offer customers the opportunity to use them right then and there. Shoppers like them because they are convenient and cheap — usually about $100 instead of the $500 or $600 charged at a dentist’s office. But regulators and dentists have raised concerns about the safety of such practices. Officials say the question that needs to be answered is whether the people at the kiosks are technically performing dental work, which would be illegal.