



Sentinel

SUNDAY

March 6, 2005

50p

You remember some
murders much more
than others -
Black Panther recalled

City turn their
backs on Akinbiyi
Seagulls made to pay
the penalty by Gifton



Vets fear pets can pass MRSA to their owners

- Scientists start study to confirm suspicions
- Warnings to veterinary practices to be vigilant

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One in 19 couples is swinging
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Style down the ages
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FEARS are growing that the hospital superbug MRSA can be passed from household pets to people.

Sentinel Sunday can reveal scientists are beginning a 10-week study to confirm their suspicion that the potentially fatal bug can be transmitted from cats and dogs to humans.

Warnings are also being issued to veterinary practices up and down the country urging them to be vigilant for animal MRSA, and to adhere to high standards of hygiene to keep the bug under control.

Professor David Taylor, of Glasgow Veterinary School, said there had been cases of animals contracting MRSA from humans, but now scientists fear the reverse is happening.

He said: "It is definitely possible that this infection can go back to humans."

"We are carrying out this project to see if there is a direct link. There is no reason why people should not be colonised by the organism from animals."

"We hope to work out what exactly happens, but there is no reason why the organism should not get back to people. At this stage we do not know how extensive it is."

Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus is blamed for killing 5,000 people a year in British hospitals.

MRSA is transmitted by direct contact with the bacteria, such as touching contaminated skin or inanimate objects.

But people with serious health problems or undergoing surgery are at particular risk. One-in-three people carry the bug harmlessly.

By Harri Aston

In 2003 The Health Protection Agency reported for the first time that animals had been found infected with MRSA. It identified 12 infected animals.

The discovery led to fears that the spread of the bacteria would be far more difficult to control if animals could pass it back to humans.

Mr Taylor, who is in charge of the research project, said there had been 20 cases of animal MRSA in Glasgow alone in the last two years.

He said: "For us it is fairly recent event and we are still finding out more about it. It has been two years since our first case here, it is quite a new phenomenon."

"In the last year to 18 months it has become a lot more common and we take advice from the local MRSA hospital adviser, and their advice was basically to improve hygiene. That has made a dramatic difference."

The issue of MRSA in animals was raised in Sentinel Sunday last week by Bruce Barker, who is a partner at the Cheadle-based Rogers, Brock and Barker veterinary practice.

Mr Barker said there was a "tiny percentage" of MRSA in animals, with one suspected case in the Moorsides.

He said: "If there is a suspected case in animals we have to resort to going to the laboratories and take swabs of any wounds that are slow to heal."

"If there is any animal that has surgery and has problems with

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Altered images: Experts face-up to beauty debate



● STAFFORDSHIRE University is ready to welcome a 160-strong audience for its annual event to mark International Women's Day. The event, named Dissecting The Concept Of Beauty, will feature a panel of experts debating the theme. Speakers will include the university's media and culture expert Professor Ellis Cashmore and NHS work-life balance co-ordinator Carol Howard, pictured above. Stafford College students will also perform a dance, based on growing up in an image-obsessed culture. The event starts at 6pm on Thursday in the Pavilion Hall, College Road, Stoke-on-Trent.

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New D-road surface poses safety risk say officials

A ROAD surface being laid as part of the £40 million overhaul of the A500 has already been banned for safety reasons on routes in another EU country.

Highways officials in the Republic of Ireland have for five years refused to use the asphalt on roads with speed limits above 30mph, because of fears it can cause cars to skid under heavy braking.

Their stance has been supported by a Derbyshire traffic officer, who voiced his concerns after carrying out a practical test of the surface's grip.

But the Highways Agency, which is responsible for trunk roads such as the A500, says it has been rigorously tested and used across the country for years.

The substance, known as stone mastic asphalt (SMA), is being laid on the reconstructed D-road, which is undergoing a two-year flagship scheme to improve safety and tackle congestion.

Although the road currently has a speed limit of 30mph, this is only a temporary reduction during the works from its normal maximum of 50mph. Once complete, the road will have a maximum speed limit of 50mph.

Tests carried out by the National Roads Authorities (NRA), the Irish republic's equivalent of the Highways Agency, raised concerns about the surface's ability to provide enough friction for tyres to grip at higher speeds.

An NRA spokesman said: "Local authorities here have been instructed by us to confine usage of SMA to 30mph zones, as a positive safety measure."

Conor Faughnan, of the Irish Automobile Association, backed the NRA's stance, describing it as "prudent".

He said: "The material works well within the parameters where speeds are lower. It is not considered suitable for faster roads."

Mr Faughnan added one problem with SMA was its quick rate of wear, particularly on roads such as dual carriageways and motorways which carry thousands of cars a day.

Research by the NRA found the surface had a lifespan of up to 14 years, almost half that of a harder-wearing hot rolled asphalt dressing.

Another issue raised about the road surface has been its grip level when newly-laid.

Potential problems with the surfacing have been highlighted by Sergeant Jim Allen, of Derbyshire Police, who tested the surface in dry conditions and said: "Instead of a screaming tire on the road, there was a gentle hiss. It skidded far further than I ever expected."

Experts say this could be caused by the road surface "binder" melting in the heat caused by the friction of heavy braking.

The AA Motoring Trust has concerns about

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Caudwell spends £1 million fighting tax loophole closure

MOBILE phone tycoon John Caudwell has spent £1 million fighting Government moves to close tax avoidance schemes which save his business a fortune.

Mr Caudwell said: "There's a real need for consistency in the way Customs and Excise, and Government, apply the law."

"They make the law and then, because they realise companies are using it to make gains, they change it."

Mr Caudwell confirmed Phones 4u is one of 70 retailers

that make a charge of 2.5 per cent on goods for "cash handling" on credit and debit card transactions — a banking service which is currently exempt from VAT in European law.

Under normal circumstances, every retailer has to hand over to the Government 17.5 per cent of the value of most goods in VAT. So if a consumer bought a £100 mobile phone, £17.50 would go to the Treasury's coffers.

The scheme allows a com-

pany to reduce its VAT charge and pay only £17.06 to the Treasury, and provide an extra 46 pence to the company's bottom line.

Customers are not affected by the scheme.

Customs initially took Debenhams to a VAT tribunal last year and won a ruling blocking the use of the scheme.

However, Debenhams had the decision overturned at an appeal last summer.

Treasury and Customs Minister John Healey has already pledged to take the Debenhams case to the Court of Appeal.

It is not the first scheme Mr Caudwell has used to legally lower his exposure to taxation.

Sentinel Sunday has previously reported how he used a off-shore trust to legally avoid paying £6 million in corporation tax.

Lawyers acting for the billionaire are expected to go to the House of Lords next month

in the latest stage of the long-running dispute.

Caudwell Group's legal action began in 2002 when it was ruled that contributions to Employment Benefit Trusts (EBTs) were exempt from corporation tax.

Mr Caudwell said: "There are thousands of business the length and breadth of Britain which will be hanging on the decision."

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