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Florida's champions

Gators' Donovan and Meyer help each other to basketball, football crowns, 1C

(Illustration by Robert D. Graham, USA TODAY; Photo by Jason Hertzberg, USA TODAY)



Looking out over Coney Island Avenue, Yakov Semichan waits for customers at his barber shop in Brooklyn. The sign, written in Urdu, says the names of the barbers and promotes that the shop also cuts children's hair.

Along a Brooklyn avenue, a melting pot — and peace

Enemies in other parts of the world live in harmony here. What's their secret?

By Rick Hampson
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — What is it about Coney Island Avenue?

That's what Brooklyn College sociologist Jerry Kruse wonders as he rides the B69 bus along this 5-mile commercial strip, which is populated at various stops by pockets of West Indians, Latinos, Pakistanis, Indians, Orthodox Jews, Chinese, Russians, Israelis and Ukrainians.

How do so many different kinds of people live so closely yet so peacefully?

As the bus moves south from Prospect Park toward Brighton Beach, the store signs change from English to Arabic to Hebrew to Chinese to Cyrillic. Bearded ultra-Orthodox Jewish men in black coats and fedoras share the sidewalks and store aisles with veiled Muslim girls and saris-clad Hindu women.

At Cleveland Road, a Moldavian Jew and a Pakistani Muslim cut hair at adjacent barber shops. At Avenue I, a Muslim grocer boasts that a third of his goods are kosher. At Avenue R, Tayba Islamic Center sits next door to Chabad Jewish Center.

Elsewhere in the world, some of these people — Muslims and Jews, Russians and Ukrainians, Pakistanis and Indians — are at each others' throats. Here, Kruse says, "They grasp it almost immediately. This is not the place for that."

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Cover story

Hospitals target chemical in plastic

Substance in equipment could harm newborns

By Liz Szabo
USA TODAY

A growing number of hospitals are trying to protect fragile newborns from a newly recognized threat: chemicals in the plastic medical equipment that provides them with lifesaving blood, medicine or nutrition.

More than 100 hospitals have pledged to phase out a hormone-like substance called DEHP, or di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate, which makes the plastic in blood bags and intravenous tubing more flexible.

Manufacturers say the chemical is safe, and doctors agree that the benefits of specialized care for newborns outweigh any potential risk.

But many health care leaders are concerned about studies in animals that show the chemical can suppress testosterone, impair fertility and alter the development of reproductive organs. Richard Grady, interim chief of pediatric urology at Seattle's Children's Hospital & Regional Medical Center, says that even minute amounts of the chemical could pose risks for infants whose organs are still developing, especially newborn boys who spend weeks in neonatal intensive-care units (NICUs).

Grady's hospital is one of the 100 hospitals phasing out the substance.

To make it easier to protect patients from DEHP, a coalition of medical groups called Health Care Without Harm has asked the Food and Drug



In the NICU: Critically ill newborns are exposed to DEHP through tubing.

Administration (FDA) to require manufacturers to label plastics made with the chemical. The American Medical Association, the American Nurses Association and Kaiser Permanente, the country's largest non-profit health system, have signed on in support.

Although the FDA rejected the coalition's petitions in 1999 and 2001, the agency did advise hospitals in 2002 to find alternatives to DEHP, especially for the most vulnerable patients: male newborns, pregnant women carrying boys and boys near puberty.

Concern about DEHP has grown steadily since. Government studies have found DEHP in the bodies of about 30% of Americans tested.

In December, the government's National Toxicology Program concluded there is "serious" concern — its

highest level — that DEHP could harm critically ill baby boys. The report also found reason for concern in boys younger than 12 months and those born to pregnant women who have certain medical treatments.

Marian Stanley of the American Chemistry Council describes those risks as "theoretical" because of the scarcity of human studies. She says the federal report was "erring on the precautionary side, because you can't really get exposure information from these tiny infants."

The FDA hasn't yet answered the petition on DEHP, filed in late July, but the agency is working with international groups to find a safe exposure level for hospitalized patients, spokeswoman Karen Riley says. That will help the FDA decide on labeling.

Some hospital device manufacturers say they're already seeing a boom in DEHP-free goods. Braun Medical, a Pennsylvania-based manufacturer, is building a new facility to help keep up with demand. With a burgeoning range of choices, Allen Blakey, a spokesman for a trade group called the Vinyl Institute, says there's no need for FDA labeling.

But many health care providers say it's important to act now to keep patients safe rather than wait for proof.

"The Hippocratic Oath says to do no harm," says Sister Mary Ellen Ledjelewska, ecology program coordinator at Catholic Healthcare West, a network of 40 hospitals in California, Arizona and Nevada that also has phased out many products with DEHP.

"We should be going to these alternatives if at all possible."

Corruption in Iraq

Record cases in contract probe

Crackdown aims at 'second insurgency'

By Matt Kelley
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — A federal crackdown on corruption involving U.S. contracts in Iraq produced a record number of criminal and administrative cases last month — including the largest bribery case.

The flurry of activity resulted from investigations overseen by a Justice Department task force set up last fall to target corruption in the \$44.5 billion Iraq reconstruction program.

Corruption in Iraq "subverted the 'second insurgency' by the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) — has been the target of numerous congressional hearings, critical of the slow pace of prosecutions. Pentagon auditors have questioned \$4 billion in contractors' bills for work in Iraq. So far, 29 people have been charged or convicted, seven in July.

"We're going to see some real results this year in many of the cases SIGIR has over at the Justice Department, as well as the work of this task force," said Stuart Bowen, the inspector general in a phone interview from Baghdad.

Investigators accounted for four arrests in the last week of July alone, including those of Army

Maj. John Cockburn, his wife and sister for allegedly taking \$3.6 million in bribes. They have pleaded not guilty.

Since mid-July, action was taken against 11 people and five companies, ranging from criminal convictions to suspension from new contracts. One company suspended as part of an ongoing bribery investigation operates seven warehouses storing weapons and supplies.

The busiest previous month was February, when five people were indicted, two pleaded guilty, and one was suspended from government contracting, records show.

The task force includes Bowen's office, the Army's Criminal Investigation Division, the Defense Criminal Investigation Service, the FBI, IRS and the Department of Homeland Security.

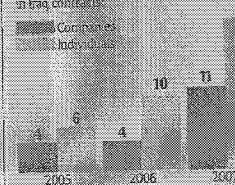
Some of the cases brought last month: Houston businessman Samir Mahmoud Itani was indicted for overcharging the Army about \$2 million for food supplies. He has pleaded not guilty. Paul Nugent, Itani's lawyer, said "there was no intentional wrongdoing."

Former Army Reserve major John Allen Toward pleaded guilty to taking more than \$220,000 in kickbacks from a supplier in Iraq.

Anthony Martin, a former employee of KBR Inc., pleaded guilty July 13 to taking \$9,000 in kickbacks from a KBR subcontractor.

Cut off

The number of companies and individuals suspended or banned from government contracting because of alleged misconduct in Iraq contracts



Sources: Army, Air Force and Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction

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