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## Washing too much? Why a little dirt might be a good thing

Oh, don't touch that! It's dirty! What kid hasn't heard that frantic command from a parent about a bazillion times? We are programmed from the time we have enough motor skills to touch and pick up foreign objects to be fearful of ones covered with pesky germs. Touching a suspect object is almost sure to be followed by an intense parental hand-scrubbing, and a stern lesson on the dangers of dirt.

We are a nation obsessed with cleanliness. Supermarket shelves are packed with varieties of soaps and other cleaning products that promise to kill every type of germ in the known universe. A plain white bar of soap will hardly do the job, according to the antibacterial soap peddlers.

But has our quest to create a global "clean room" free of

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## House gives nod to nurse safe staffing bill

The House of Representatives last week approved landmark legislation that would limit the number of patients a registered nurse care for at once in most acute care hospital settings. It also establishes programs designed to bolster the nursing workforce.

"An Act Relative to Patient Safety," is the result of a near decade-long debate over whether hospitals are adequately staffed with nurses and whether state govern-

### Patient safety

ment should regulate how hospitals are staffed. Nursing groups have said patients are being put at risk due to inadequate nurse staff levels. Hospital executives have countered that the staffing should be determined by the facility, and not state regulation.

The bill the House approved by a 133-20 margin followed a month of intense negotiations between hospitals, nurses and lawmakers. It moves on to the Senate for consideration.

While the original bill included specific nurse staffing limits, the compromise redraft directs the state Department of Public Health to establish limits through regulation. DPH would determine the staffing limits by taking

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### Committee notes

#### Sepsis hearing planned

House Public Health Committee Chairman Peter Koutoujian announced he will be hosting a special June 12 oversight hearing on Sepsis, a potentially fatal condition that occurs when body has a severe reaction to an infection. Blood clotting, organ failure and even death can occur.

Sepsis is most commonly caused by bacterial infections. These infections may occur in hospitalized patients who have undergone surgery.

The hearing, which will include testimony from invited sepsis experts, will be held at 10 a.m. at Peabody City Hall. The public is welcome to attend and observe.

#### OxyContin report pending

The Legislature's OxyContin Commission hopes to soon release its highly-anticipated report on how the state can better address abuse of the controversial prescription painkiller, as well as the abuse of other prescription and illegal drugs.

The 11-member commission of lawmakers, public health officials, physicians and pain management specialists was created in 2004 in response to growing concerns over OxyContin abuse. The commission held several public hearings throughout Eastern Massachusetts in 2005 and consulted with numerous other experts to help collect the information used to develop the report.

The report will recommended several new laws and regulations that could be implemented to reduce drug abuse and addiction in Massachusetts.

# Spot on?

## Measles cases raise concerns over old disease

In the largest local measles outbreak in seven years, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health has confirmed 11 new cases in Boston workers since early May.

Measles, a disease that has been dramatically reduced in the last 40 years, is characterized by a fever, cough, runny nose, and red-ened eyes, followed by a rash that spreads

from head to toe. Complications can be more serious and potentially fatal. Infected people are able to spread the disease from four days before

symptoms appear until four days after. The airborne virus is extremely contagious.

Measles was more common decades ago, infecting 450,000 people and killing 450 each year in the United States.

In 1963, the introduction of the measles vaccine drastically reduced the number of cases, and the disease

is now relatively rare. Most people today receive the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine, which

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**Measles was more common decades ago, infecting 450,000 people and killing 450 each year in the United States.**

## 25th anniversary of AIDS marked

It was 25 years ago this week the virus the causes AIDS was officially recognized, sparking a global health crisis that many has gotten worse despite medial advances and a deeper understanding of the disease.

The human immunodeficiency virus is responsible for the more than 25 million deaths worldwide to date (500,000 in the U.S.), and at least another 40 million have been infected with the virus.

About 40,000 Americans are infected each year. Drug treatments for AIDS have allowed many infected individuals to live for decades with the disease, but a vaccine or cure for the disease is not believed to be near. Yet, in many of the world's less modernized countries, where the spread of AIDS is the most severe, infected individuals receive little treatment and are quickly exposed to the disease's brutality.

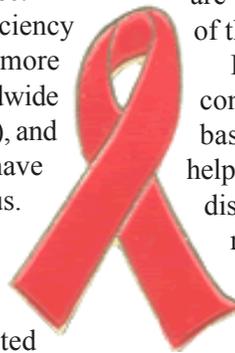
AIDS has had to battle social stigma in addition to its devastating

effects. The disease emerged in early 1980s as the domain of homosexual men, although many cases are spread through heterosexual contact.

African-American men and woman are among the hardest hit sector of the U.S. AIDS population.

High-profile Americans who contracted HIV, such as former basketball star Magic Johnson, helped to increase awareness of the disease, but many say more outreach is needed, especially among poorer Americans and underdeveloped countries.

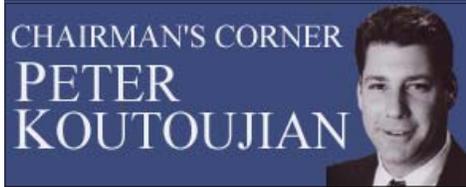
As researchers around the globe continue to hunt for a cure, there has been an increased call for state and federal funding for treatment programs has not kept pace with need. In Massachusetts, the House of Representatives Fiscal Year 2007 budget plan calls for \$37 million in AIDS spending, a \$1.5 million increase over current budget levels.



## The sun will shine again, so be ready to cover up

Even though the spring of 2006 has been overcast and soggy, we can expect the sun to return in full-force as the summer approaches.

The Dana Farber Cancer Institute parked in informational RV outside the State House this week, offering materials on the importance of cancer screenings and a test that can help to warn of skin damage. Some of the tests as quite revealing – and even alarming – as they expose skin damage that is all but invisible under regular light. The screen demonstrates how sunlight quietly damages the skin and leaves us vulnerable to skin cancer.



The potential for sun damage, of course, is highest in the summer because the sun rays are at their strongest. A sunburn is more than a painful souvenir. It's direct evidence of the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays. Sun exposure is cumulative, as we spend a good amount of our lives in direct sunlight (this past month notwithstanding). It's best to wear protective sun screen of Sun Protection Factor (SPF) 15

or higher. Fair-skinned individuals should use a 35 SPF or higher. A brimmed hat can help keep the sun off the face, and sunglasses with the UV sticker can protect the eyes and surrounding skin.

Sun rays are at their strongest between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. The American Cancer Society suggest teaching children the "shadow rule," which means if your shadow is shorter than you are, then the sun is at its point in the sky when UV rays are their strongest.

Regular doctors visits are also important to determining whether any skin damage has occurred that needs further examination.

## Study suggests too much cleaning may cause allergies

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impurities actually made us more susceptible to illness?

Some research has revealed that it may be good to be a little dirty, although it's a stretch to suggest keeping clean can be harmful. As a general rule, bacteria and other germs are to be avoided. But being too vigilant about keeping clean may also be making us sick.

In fact, the Partnership for Learning reports that 75 percent of the dust in your house comes from you and the other people living in it. Dead skin and other particles picked up from the outdoors are most of what we contribute to the dust bin we feverishly try to avoid.

Our bodies also defend us from impurities by first being able to recognize them. Anti-bodies (the part of our immune system produced to fight off intruders) are produced to fight of antigens.

A 2003 study highlighted in the

"Stanford Report" suggested that children may be especially vulnerable to sustaining long-term harm from exposure to overly-sterile environments.

The "hygiene hypothesis," as it was called, concludes that extended exposure

to overly-clean environments could cause children to develop the skin condition eczema, allergies and asthma.

The decrease in hepatitis A, due to improved sanitary conditions, might be causing an increase in allergies and other ailments. The hypothesis is that hepatitis A, which was much more common decades ago, may protect against certain allergies and asthma by killing particular cells that induce allergies.

### KEEPING THOSE HANDS CLEAN

Tips from the Centers for Disease Control

Wash your hands for 20 seconds. Need a timer? Imagine singing "Happy Birthday" twice.

Dry your hands using a paper towel. If possible, use it to turn off the faucet.

If soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based gel to clean hands.



The study did not suggest that the public try to spread hepatitis A, but that a better understanding of the diseases affect on asthma and allergies can aid in the development of drug or antibody that can fight asthma and allergies.

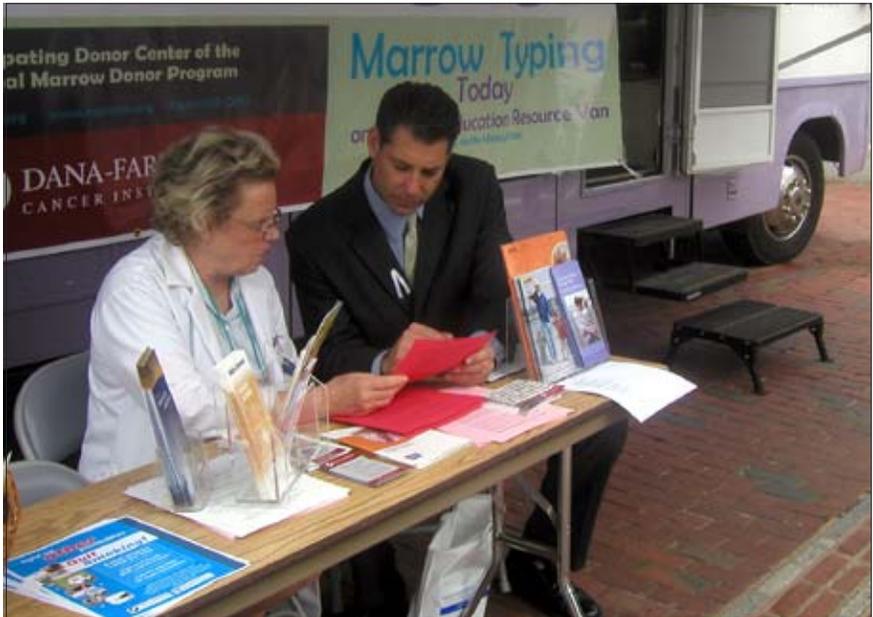
## CDC chief warns of bird flu outbreak

The director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told an audience of public health officials and medical community members this week that a Bird Flu pandemic will likely strike the United States, and encouraged state and local officials to step-up preparation plans.

Dr. Julie Gerberding, the CDC chief, spoke as part of a panel discussion held by the Massachusetts Health Policy Forum to address the Commonwealth's state of preparedness should the avian flu strike. Massachusetts Public Health Commissioner Paul Cote and House Public Health Committee Chairman Peter Koutoujian were among the other presenters. U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy appeared in a pre-recorded video address.

The federal government has stated that preparing for and responding to a pandemic is not solely its responsibility. Gerberding reported that the current H5N1 avian flu virus has a greater than 50% fatality rate and has genetic similarities strikingly

## Screen savers



*Public Health Committee Chairman Peter Koutoujian speaks with Libby Tracey, R.N., a clinical nurse specialist at Dana Farber Cancer Institute, about cancer screening on June 6 as part of the Coalition of Boston Teaching Hospitals' Partnership for Healthy Communities event at the State House.*

close to the 1918 "Spanish flu" strain that devastated nations world-wide, but only had a 10% mortality rate. Massachusetts has made significant progress in its flu pandemic planning since the Joint Committee on Public Health's oversight hearing held last October.

However, Koutoujian said the burden of pandemic response implementation will fall on our local towns and communities. At this point in time, many local boards of health and local public health officers do not have the resources, or the infrastructure, to respond.

## State confirms 11 new measles cases in Boston

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is required for anyone entering school in Massachusetts. The vaccine provides immunity for life, although anyone who received a measles vaccine before 1968 may have a less effective dose. Those who have already had the measles are also immune.

Though vaccination has made measles rare in the United States, international travel can bring it from other countries where the disease is still common. These new cases in Boston appear to have started with a

computer programmer who recently came from India to work at a local company. The first seven cases were all found in employees of a firm located in the John Hancock Tower. Subsequent cases were found in an employee of a local church member, a Hancock Tower electrical worker, an employee of two local restaurants and an East Boston woman.

A vaccine received within three days (72 hours) of exposure can help reduce risk of measles, and hundreds of employees in the affected busi-

nesses have recently been vaccinated. People who are concerned about exposure should call their doctor rather than arriving in the office without warning, as anyone who was exposed to the disease needs to stay at home to help prevent the spread. Public health officials are reminding the public to check their vaccination histories to make sure that they have been appropriately immunized against the measles. By being vaccinated, everyone can help prevent a major outbreak.

## More reasons to cut back on saturated fats

Experts have long warned against saturated fat because of its direct relationship to LDL ("bad") blood cholesterol and heart disease risk. New research suggests that too much saturated fat may be problematic, even if your cholesterol is not high. Because of the possible effects on insulin functions, the potential risks are raised for diabetes, cancer, ovarian disorders and other health problems. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend a maximum target of 10 percent of calories for most adults. This target translates to 20g per day for the average adult which can be calculated by adding grams of saturated fat listed on food labels. Cutting saturated fat from the current average of 12 to 10 percent would lower blood cholesterol by two to four percent. People whose blood cholesterol levels remain high even while meeting this goal may need to reduce their saturated fat intake even further, to 12-18g per day. There are many ways to achieve this reduction. Each time you exchange a deck of cards sized portion of a high fat red meat for lean red meat, seafood or skinless chicken, you cut at least five grams of saturated fat. Two teaspoons of



soft margarine or olive oil instead of butter will get rid of more than three grams. – MSNBC

### Doctors struggle to treat mysterious and unbearable pain

It was supposed to be a typical ballet class. She was then a senior dance major at U.C. Irvine, doing her usual stretching routine. As she returned to an upright position, she felt a sudden pop in her hamstring. An intense burning sensation followed; it felt as if her leg had been doused in gasoline and set on fire. The next day, the athletic trainer determined that she had pulled her hamstring. But even years later, the pain would not subside. It migrated to her other leg,

leaving her bedridden for nearly a decade, and overtook her vocal cords, leaving her temporarily mute. All the while, doctors puzzled over her mysterious condition. There are an estimated one million Americans living with complex regional pain syndrome, a nerve disorder formerly known as reflex sympathetic dystrophy syndrome. Even mild trauma in these patients can cause the nerves to misfire sending intense pain messages to the brain. For the past 150 years, so little was known about complex regional pain syndrome that it was often diagnosed as psychosomatic. Desperate patients turn to new, often unproven, drugs and treatments. With this condition there is very little if any hard lab evidence or good imaging confirmation. The syndrome is baffling but was first documented during the Civil War by Dr. S.W. Mitchell. Few physicians are familiar with it; and the average patient sees about ten doctors before a diagnosis is made. For many patients the pain is life altering, leaving them in debilitating pain. Riding in a car on a bumpy road can be torture. Some doctors think it is "all in their heads." – *New York Times*

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into account current staffing plans, patient populations, patient outcomes, hospital medical error rates and other factors. Nurses' skill level will also be used to determine staffing limits. Many hospitals may already meet or exceed the staffing limits DPH develops.

Teaching hospitals must meet the DPH standards by October 2008, and other facilities must follow by 2010. Mental health hospitals, nursing homes and other facilities would not be affected by the legislation.

Hospitals may be granted a waiver

of up to nine months from the DPH-established staffing limits in the event of extreme financial hardship.

The bill also establishes programs designed to improve the nursing profession through training, incentives and rewards. The Clara Barton Nursing Excellence Trust Fund would provide several resources to nurses, including a repayment program for nursing student loans, scholarship programs for nursing students, nursing refresher courses and recruitment of nursing student candidates from underrepresented populations.

Massachusetts would joint Califor-

nia as the only two states in the country to mandate nurse staffing levels by state law.

