

IN THE NEWS

JTS to tap Eisen for chancellor spot

The Jewish Theological Seminary is set to name Arnold Eisen as chancellor.

Eisen, chairman of Stanford University's religious studies department, will succeed Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, who will step down in June.

Eisen is not a rabbi but is known as a leading figure in Jewish studies.

He has devoted much of his research to American Jewry, focusing on the transformation of Judaism in the modern West.

Eisen will take the reins as Conservative Judaism faces a series of challenges, including dwindling numbers and the battle over gays and lesbians in the movement.

His selection must still be approved by the JTS board, which is expected to vote early this week.

Israel presses isolation of Hamas

Israel is shunning any foreign dignitaries who hold contacts with the Palestinian Authority government under Hamas.

The new policy, announced Sunday, was initiated by Prime Minister-elect Ehud Olmert in a bid to increase the radical Islamic group's international isolation.

"We need to press the policy already in place, and get the world to close ranks around the understanding that a terrorist government, even if it is democratically elected, is no interlocutor," Olmert confidant Ze'ev Boim told Army Radio.

Pope to visit Auschwitz in May

Pope Benedict XVI said he would he would visit the site of the Auschwitz death camp in May. The trip will take place from May 25-28, Vatican officials said Saturday.

Benedict has emphasized the importance of interfaith discussions and respect for Judaism since taking over as pope last year.

WORLD REPORT

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Elderly Jews feel the brunt of confusion on drug benefits

By DAVID J. SILVERMAN

WASHINGTON (JTA) — After sorting through piles of brochures, Millie Topper thought she had finally found the right Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit plan to pay for the high blood pressure medications she wanted.

But once the 77-year-old resident of Silver Spring, Md., crunched the numbers, she realized she couldn't afford the plan's heavy deductibles and monthly premiums. Grudgingly, she signed up two months ago for a plan that forces her to take a generic drug in lieu of the brand name she prefers.

"I don't know which way to turn," Topper says.

Her friends, she says, complain that "you'd have to be a rocket scientist to figure out the Medicare drug benefit."

It's a familiar story for Jewish officials who staff the community's elderly help lines, where phones have been ringing off the hook in advance of the May 15 deadline to enroll in a prescription benefit plan.

The benefit, which took effect Jan. 1, has been financially detrimental to some Jewish seniors and helpful to others — but bewildering to almost all.

"I haven't heard anybody say, 'Boy that's terrific,'" said Beth Hess, director of aging and disability services for the Jewish Social Services Agency. "Nobody's dancing on the ceiling with enthusiasm for this."

Its consequences are important for a Jewish community with a disproportionately large number of seniors. A recent survey counted 19 percent of U.S. Jews as senior, as opposed to 12 percent in the general population.

The benefit is the fruit of the Medicare Prescription Drug Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003, which for the first time covers all Medicare beneficiaries.

The government turned to private enterprise to implement the massive entitlement against the backdrop of escalating drug costs. Incentives were offered to private companies to administer the benefit at the lowest possible cost. The idea was to encourage profit-driven companies to compete against one another to enlist seniors, causing prices to drop.

According to Medicare's new prescription drug plan, known as Part D, beneficiaries must choose a plan offered by a private insurer.

Each Part D plan — and there are dozens in each state — has its own "formulary," a restrictive list of drugs, pharmacies, monthly premiums, co-payments and yearly deductibles.

Finding the best and most affordable plan has Jewish seniors grouching about the maze of options. The jargon has added to the confusion.

"I didn't even know what 'formulary' meant," Topper said.

For those enrollees who are now paying less for their drugs, the immense confusion triggered by the transition has overshadowed the more affordable costs.

With many seniors on as many as 10 prescription drugs at once, and others continually diagnosed with new conditions, finding the right formulary has become a tall order.

One way of searching for plans is by accessing the "plan finder" on the Medicare.gov Web site, a process many experts say can be confusing for anyone, let alone seniors who

Continued on page 2

FOCUS
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■ *As the Medicare enrollment deadline looms, elderly Jews are unclear on benefits*

Continued from page 1

may not be computer savvy.

Some seniors pore over each individual formulary brochure they receive in the mail. But most chafe at sifting through the formularies or using the Internet to find the best plan.

Many Jewish seniors have turned to their children and grandchildren for help

"What's most impressive is how active children are in trying to help their parents, regardless of how much money they have," Hess said.

"Active adult children are making it a lot easier on Jewish seniors."

William Peirez, president of B'nai B'rith International's MetroNorth region, enrolled his 87-year-old mother in an AARP plan.

Peirez is angry at the benefit, which he says is far too complicated.

"An 80-year-old cannot figure this out," he said. "It doesn't make sense. It's too difficult for me, and I'm 62 and a lawyer."

Jewish leaders and policy analysts agree that some of the biggest losers from the benefit are the indigent on Medicaid, including a number of Jews.

"There is this stereotype that all Jews have money," says Rachel Goldberg, director of senior advocacy at B'nai B'rith International. "We forget that while the average income for Jews is slightly higher, we still do have older Jews living in poverty."

At the beginning of the year, all 6 million Americans who qualify for both Medicaid and Medicare were automatically

enrolled in random private plans under the new benefit.

Prior to the switch, Medicaid recipients, who are in the lowest income bracket, had received their drugs without cost. Now they are saddled with more restricted options and face co-payment costs of a few dollars each time they request a prescription.

"Many are paying more than they used to, and simply cannot afford it," Goldberg said. "What sounds like coffee money to middle class people, if you're living hand-to-mouth can be whether or not you make your electric bill."

Goldberg and other Jewish leaders are also highlighting lower-middle- to low-income seniors who come close but do not qualify for Medicaid. This group has the most to gain from the benefit, but also the most to lose, they said.

Many seniors lack assistance in paying for their drugs, though there are subsidies for people who pass an assets test. But poorer seniors are less likely to have access to advisers and the best information to find the right plan.

Without help, many Jewish seniors feel powerless and are avoiding the benefit altogether, experts said.

"They are resigned to struggling with a very complicated situation where what's

right for them can change over time," said David Gamse, executive director of the Jewish Council for the Aging.

Another lightning rod for confusion and concern is gaps in the benefit structure, called "doughnut holes."

If drug costs — including out-of-pocket costs and Medicare's portion — exceed \$2,250, Medicare pays nothing while the beneficiary must cover 100 percent, until costs reach \$5,100. Then Medicare defrays 95 percent of costs.

Many Jewish seniors don't know whether it's worth spending the extra money in monthly

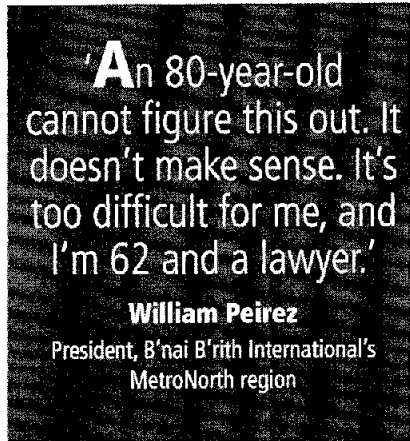
premiums to receive a plan that will fill in all or part of the gap.

Jews who are better off financially and already receiving their drugs through separate plans are unsure whether they would fare better or worse under Part D.

Opting into the benefit may result in worse or more costly coverage and lead to the termination of former plans — but seniors also want to avoid late fees incurred if they enroll after the May 15 deadline.

The silver lining, some said, was the dedication younger Jews were showing to their elders. That's an example for all Americans, Goldberg said.

"It would be nice for the Jewish community to be a model for that," she said. ■



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Jews oppose immigration bills

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A consortium of Jewish groups is taking action against two controversial immigration bills.

The New York-based Jews for Racial and Economic Justice is gathering signatures for an ad opposing two immigration bills, one passed by the U.S. House of Representatives and one under debate in the Senate.

The House bill calls for fining, detaining and deporting illegal immigrants, and for penalizing those who help them. The ad, which will be placed in newspapers across the country this week, calls upon Jews to remember, as they tell the

Passover story, the millions of Jewish immigrants who came to America over the past two centuries. The ad reads, in part, "as Jews, we know that immigrants have always enhanced this nation and affirm our belief that immigrants continue to do so today."

It calls for a path to citizenship instead of "proposals that would create an exploitative guest-worker program." Signatories so far include Ruth Messinger, president of the American Jewish World Service; Rabbi David Ellenson, president of Hebrew Union College; and playwright Tony Kushner. ■

Drug bust nabs U.S. teens in Israel

By URIEL HEILMAN

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Parents, students and school administrators in the United States and Israel are buzzing over the arrest on drug-related charges of three Americans studying in Israel — but drug-abuse experts say it should come as no surprise.

The three Americans, whose names have not been made public, were arrested March 31 after officials at the Alexander Muss Institute for Israel Education discovered they had 3.3 pounds of marijuana. After being held and questioned by police, the three were released into the custody of their families and have been expelled from their study-abroad program.

At least six other students involved with the incident were asked to leave the program, a 10-week course for 106 high school graduates of the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Md.

"This is no doubt the most difficult and problematic and most sensitive issue we've had to deal with," Muss Institute headmaster Chaim Fischgrund told JTA. "It's the quantity and the ramifications of the quantity of the students involved."

He added, "The amount that was discovered was such that we felt we had to involve the authorities."

Drug experts say the street value of the pot could be as much as \$15,000 and that the students likely intended to sell it. On April 4, police arrested a 17-year-old Israeli on suspicion of selling the marijuana to the Americans.

This is the first time the Muss Institute, based in Hod Hasharon, has faced a drug incident of this magnitude, but incidents of drug or alcohol abuse by students on study-abroad programs are fairly common, according to substance-abuse specialists in Israel.

Often, they say, schools bungle the response to such incidents by limiting it to the few students involved, rather than systematically confronting the problem of widespread drug use among Jewish teenagers.

"I would not be surprised if the numbers were that 50 percent of the kids would experiment with pot during trips abroad to Israel," said Rabbi Josh Mark, an addiction specialist in Israel who works with teenagers and young adults.

"It's probably true of any other exchange program to any other country. These kids are going to go to college in the States, and that's where it happens, too."

At least one of every four American Jewish high school graduates has used or experimented with illegal drugs, says Rabbi Yehoshua Eliovson, who runs a Web site that allows teenagers to share their substance-abuse problems anonymously.

A considerable number of them bring their drug habit with them to Israel.

The alarming rates are not a reflection on Israel, he says.

"It's my firm belief that what we see in Israel is the manifestation of problems that start with these kids in high school in America," Eliovson said. "I don't believe for a second that these kids are having their first introductions to drugs in Israel. When these kids find themselves in an unsupervised environment, their behavior becomes extreme."

The recipe for trouble is simple, experts say. Teenagers who have never lived away from home suddenly find themselves 6,000 miles from their parents, with minimal supervision.

Many have experimented with drugs before. Add to that the widespread notion among Americans here that they're almost beyond the law because they're foreigners, and that their dollars can go further in Israel, and teenagers will tend toward extreme behavior — spending a lot of money in the process.

"If you take aberrant behavior and couple it with those attitudes, there's less of a fear element involved," says Caryn Green, director of a program in Israel called Crossroads that targets at-risk American teenagers.

The Charles E. Smith school's headmaster, Jonathan Cannon, declined to discuss the issue directly with JTA. However, the school issued a statement to JTA, which was similar to an e-mail sent to parents informing them of the incident.

The high school's principal also was dispatched to Israel to deal with the fallout and counsel students remaining in the program.

"CESJDS does not condone or tolerate conduct of this nature, as it is contrary to our values and it is destructive to the entire school community," the school wrote in an e-mail to parents. "In light of this situation, the school will review its program to determine ways to better educate students on the dangers and consequences of using illegal substances."

More than 90 students remain on the program, which combines trips around Israel with classroom study as part of a curriculum on Jewish history. The participants from Charles E. Smith graduated this winter and enrolled in the Israel program before starting college.

Fischgrund said the marijuana was discovered by program counselors investigating drug rumors. When school officials realized the quantity of drugs involved, they turned the matter over to police.

School officials have not said whether they'll inform the lawbreakers' intended

colleges of their arrest or their expulsion from the Muss program.

Eliovson argues that schools' impulse to expel students who use drugs masks the greater problem of widespread drug use.

"When we throw out a kid, what we're really showing is that we don't have solutions," he said. "If you believe that it's just a few bad apples, throwing the kids out may be the solution. But if it's one out of four" using drugs, "then we're just driving the problem underground. The problem hasn't been cured; it's only been suppressed."

One Jewish youth posted anonymously on TheLockers.net, Eliovson's Web site, after a drug bust last year of students from an Orthodox school in New Jersey.

"Drinking and drugging are so common these days among teens that you really don't think about getting in trouble over it," the youth wrote. "We worry about making curfew when going to a party, not the police busting in on us and getting arrested. So yeah, the kids there just weren't careful enough, and I'm not saying they should definitely get away with it, but it's what happens. This shouldn't be a big shock to anyone."

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A number of
students that
try drugs in high
school bring their
habit to Israel.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Coalition talks open

Israel's Kadima Party began formal talks with potential partners to join a governing coalition.

Kadima representatives met with counterparts from the Labor Party on Sunday.

Labor, seen as most likely to be the junior partner in a government under Prime Minister-elect Ehud Olmert, urged Kadima to commit to a diplomatic framework for ending conflict with the Palestinians.

Kadima is also expected to meet with the hawkish, pro-immigrant Yisrael Beiteinu, the Sephardi religious party Shas and the Pensioners Party.

Sharon to be named 'permanently incapacitated'

Ariel Sharon is expected to be declared permanently incapacitated later this week.

The move by the Cabinet is expected Tuesday. It would formally end his premiership and give Ehud Olmert the job, which he has held in an interim capacity since January.

West Bank terrorist killed

Israeli security forces killed a top Palestinian terrorist in the West Bank. Commandos circled the hideout of the Popular Resistance Committees chief outside Bethlehem on Sunday, and shot him when he stormed out firing at them.

There were no Israeli casualties. The slain man was originally from the Gaza Strip, and had been allegedly trying to import rocket-making techniques to the West Bank. He had been briefly in Palestinian Authority custody.

Olmert seeks to boost settlement blocs

Ehud Olmert said Israelis to be evacuated from isolated West Bank settlements would be moved to the major settlement blocs in the territory.

Asked in a Newsweek interview, the first he has given to a foreign publication since being elected prime minister last month, what his "convergence plan" would entail, Olmert said: "The idea is that most of the settlements that would have to be removed" will be "converged into the blocs of settlements that will remain under Israeli control."

"The blocs of settlements which include Ma'aleh Adumim, the Etzion bloc and Ariel will be augmented by more settlements," Olmert added.

"The rest of the territories will not have any Israeli presence and will allow territorial contiguity for a future Palestinian state."

NORTH AMERICA

U.S. suspends \$411 million to Palestinians

The United States suspended \$411 million in funds that were to go to the Palestinians, while increasing humanitarian aid.

Last Friday's move, taken because of the terrorist group Hamas' victory in recent Palestinian Authority elections, included \$130 million in infrastructure assistance and \$20 million in private enterprise development.

The overall figure of \$411 million includes \$150 million budgeted for the Palestinians this year as well as money left over from appropriations in recent years.

Of the \$411 million, \$105 million will be transferred to what the United States defines as "basic humanitarian assistance," including health, food and education.

That brings total U.S. humanitarian assistance to \$245 million, to be administered through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and other non-governmental organizations.

P.A. bill guaranteed passage

A bill that would severely restrict assistance to the Palestinians is guaranteed passage in both houses of Congress.

The Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act had garnered 274 of the 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives as cosponsors by the end of last week, and 80 of 100 senators.

Signing on as a co-sponsor commits a legislator to vote for the act.

The bill cuts all assistance to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority except for an allowance for P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas, a relative moderate who belongs to Hamas' rival party, Fatah.

The bill restricts U.S. aid to non-governmental organizations to basic health and education needs.

It also legislates that the removal of Hamas from the Palestinian Authority will not be enough to re-establish relations with the United States: No matter who runs the P.A. government, to get back into the good graces of the United States they will have to prove that they have eradicated terrorism and anti-Israel incitement.

WORLD

Kiev newspaper editor beaten

The editor in chief of a Kiev newspaper was severely beaten in what may have been retaliation for articles against anti-Semitism. Vladimir Katzman of the Stolichnye Novosti newspaper was attacked on Saturday evening, when two unidentified young men attacked him with bats in the entrance of his apartment building in Kiev. Katzman suffered head injuries and a broken hand, and was checked into a hospital where he remained in stable condition, doctors said Sunday.

The attackers didn't take any valuables, which made at least one Jewish leader think the attack was an anti-Semitic act. Vadim Rabinovich, the owner of Stolichnye Novosti and the leader of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, said the newspaper recently ran a series of articles against xenophobia and anti-Semitism in Ukraine. Police are investigating the incident.

E.U. cuts off P.A.

The European Union cut off direct aid to the Palestinian Authority. The European Union's executive office said last Friday that the decision was made because of the refusal of Hamas, the terrorist group that won a sweeping victory in P.A. parliamentary elections in January, to renounce violence and recognize Israel. E.U. foreign ministers will meet Monday to decide how to deal with future aid to the West Bank and Gaza.

Europe's freeze of funds follows similar decisions by the United States and Israel in the wake of Hamas' ascension to power.

A Hamas spokesman called the decision a collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

JTA writer wins Guggenheim

A JTA correspondent won a Guggenheim Fellowship. Ruth Ellen Gruber, JTA's senior European correspondent, received the award for her project on how Europeans are reimagining the Wild West.

Some 187 scholars, artists and scientists received awards totaling \$7.5 million.

Among the winners is literary critic Leon Wieseltier, who received the award for his project translating the unpublished works of the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai.