

EU Column

Boy racers face penalties for souped-up cars

Modified exhaust pipes on cars will be banned from next July under an EU directive on noise pollution which comes into effect next year. But it's not yet clear how the Government will enforce the law, or whether drivers could face fines for fitting enlarged exhaust pipes. Irish MEP Jim Higgins wants the Government to adopt a solution proposed by Galway-based company ICAN acoustics to include noise emissions in NCT testing. Under the plan, any car that has changed the exhaust pipe from the manufacturer's original specification would automatically fail its NCT.

Mr Higgins said, "It could curb the boy racers who intimidate law-abiding motorists with their hazardous driving, such as excessive revving, handbrake turns, and doughnuts. They're entitled to their thrills and spills, but the place for them is on a race track, not on a public road".

Report says drinking during pregnancy causes ADHD

A report presented to the European Parliament this week claims that drinking even the odd glass of wine when pregnant could harm your baby. The study carried out by Belfast-based doctor and psychiatrist Kieran O'Malley says consumption of alcohol by pregnant mothers gives rise to neurodevelopmental disorders, most commonly manifested as Attention Deficit Disorder and Asperger's Syndrome. The statistics are worrying for Ireland, which has the highest proportion of pre-natal drinking of alcohol in the EU. Recent research from the Coombe Hospital in Dublin shows that out of 125,000 mothers surveyed, 80 per cent said they had consumed alcohol while pregnant. Irish East MEP Avril Doyle said "All women should be fully informed about the serious risks associated with pre-natal alcohol consumption, particularly during the second and third trimester when drinking alcohol is most harmful." However Independent MEP Marian Harkin has come out against any plan to stop pregnant women drinking alcohol altogether.

She said "I know there are major issues with regard to foetal alcohol syndrome so I would agree — information, yes, warning labels, yes — but preventing pregnant women from taking a drink, that is a step too far for me." Meanwhile the report has caused much upset among families with ADHD across Ireland. A spokesperson for the support group HAD (Hyperactive Attention Disorder) said parents feel they are being blamed for their children's disorders, despite what they say is a body of scientific evidence which shows that at least eight of 10 cases of ADHD are genetic.

MEPs fight to retain 13 seats in Brussels

Irish MEPs are more hopeful of holding on to their 13 seats in the European Parliament following a proposal to increase the number of seats from 736 up to 750. Under the Nice Treaty, Irish representation is due to fall to 12 seats in 2009. But Ireland will lobby to retain its full quota on the basis that our population has undergone the most rapid population expansion in the Europe.

Kilkenny MEP Liam Aylward said, "The position of the Irish Government is clear — we have as much a right to any other country to our extra seat, and we intend to fight all the way to keep it."

Meanwhile other member states are already vying for extra representation, with Spain demanding at least three more seats. If the European Parliament can't reach agreement on how to divvy up the seats, at least one MEP will lose out.

People with disability in bid for freedom at European Parliament

Up to 60 Irish people with disabilities travelled to the European Parliament in Strasbourg this week as part of the biennial Freedom Drive, organised by the European Network for Independent Living. They want the EU to agree to allocate five per cent of development funding to disability projects in some of the world's poorest countries. The Irish delegation gathered with about 250 of their counterparts from 10 European countries outside the parliament singing 'We Shall Overcome', before meeting current president Hans-Gert Pottinger. Disability activist Martin Neachtain from Galway said they also want an end to State funding of institutions for people with disabilities, with the focus instead on allocating personal assistants so that everyone can enjoy independent living. However Irish MEP Brian Crowley pointed out that "It's a matter for the Irish Government and not the European Parliament to put aside funding to provide care assistance for people with disabilities, and to protect the employment rights of those care workers."

Social networking is on the rise

BY BRIGID O GORMAN

THE INFLUENCE of the internet and social networking sites continues to grow. So much so that an online drama is now being used to promote a major feature film. English actor Jamie Bell made a guest appearance on Kate Modern, the serial drama shown on social networking site bebo.com, to coincide with the release of his new film *Hallam Foe* which opened in cinemas last Friday.

With so much information competing for people's attention, companies are constantly looking for new and innovative ways to attract it. Kate Modern is funded almost entirely by product placement, a way of advertising which is becoming increasingly popular in television and movies, and now online, showing the increasing importance of the internet in reaching customers. Jamie Bell even said, "*Hallam Foe* is the first movie I've promoted where there's been such an emphasis on online."

Launched two years ago, Bebo now has over one million users in Ireland and over 31 million worldwide. A large selection of these sites are owned by young people from Carlow-Kilkenny.

It is the biggest website in Ireland and the biggest social networking site in the UK and New Zealand. The crucial thing about Bebo for advertisers is that 90 per cent of its users are under 35, making it the perfect forum

from which to reach the lucrative youth market. The attraction of its drama series, *Kate Modern*, is that it allows members have a say in how the plot is going to progress. Interactivity is very important.

Most of Bebo's users are in school or college and what attracts them to it is that they can, in a very easy and uncomplicated way, design a whole web page which is totally unique to them. They can choose their own backgrounds, put up their own pictures, videos, blogs, and music, and share these with friends. It allows them to keep in easy contact with friends and also get in touch with people they haven't seen in a long time by joining their school or college groups. People can also form groups to find people who share their interests, examples can range from "The *Father Ted* appreciation society" to the "I hate pizza club".

"Everyone likes to believe they're popular", says Susan Purcell, of Ballyragget and a self-confessed Bebo addict, when asked what the appeal of Bebo is. "The more hits you get the more popular you feel. It allows you to meet new people as well as keeping in touch with those from your past. Also if you're feeling nosy you can always click onto the profiles of people you haven't talked to in a while to see what they're up to! The fact you can use Bebo at any time of day is also an advantage," explains Susan.

The ease with which you can access anyone's profile is something which parents

and Bebo's critics find worrying. It has led to concerns that online bullying could become a problem. Bebo has also been criticised because it is impossible to know if the person setting up a profile is who they say they are, making it possible for people to lie about their age or even set up fake profiles under other people's names. Bebo has taken steps to stop such problems. It is now possible to block other members from your page and to report abuse which could lead to the person's profile being removed from Bebo. The site also provides a list of safety guidelines for people to follow when using it. Members can also make their profile private, which means only their direct friends can view it.

However, despite these worries, for most people Bebo is just good fun. You could even find love; one of the most famous stories about Bebo was Rosanna Davison, Miss World at the time, who met her boyfriend through the site. Proving how much a part of Irish life Bebo has become, the Saw Doctors now even have a song about it.

Despite its huge number of users Bebo's popularity is still growing. However, in the UK at least, it is now growing at a much slower rate than its social networking rival Facebook, indicating that perhaps Bebo's heyday there is coming to an end. Despite this it seems certain that social networking is here to stay, and as it reach grows it is only going to become more attractive and important for advertisers trying to reach a younger market.

Work begins on new medical educational facility

THE FOUNDATION stone for a new €4.2 million medical education facility at Waterford Regional Hospital was laid today by Martin Cullen, Minister for Social and Family Affairs.

The new facility, which is being jointly funded by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and the Health Services Executive, is designed to enhance the teaching of both undergraduate and postgraduate medical personnel in the south east.

Due to be completed in July 2008, the new academic teaching centre will provide state-of-the-art facilities for RCSI undergraduate students attending their clinical rotations in Waterford. This will include a 194 seat lecture theatre, a large teaching/seminar room, tutorial and reading rooms for interactive teaching, and other administrative and ancillary services. Since signing a memorandum of understanding with the hospital in 1998, the college has been sending students in

their final two years to WRH to attend clinical rotations in medicine, surgery, paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology, orthopaedics, ophthalmology, and otolaryngology.

The new facility will also be available as a teaching and learning resource for all health and allied health professionals within the HSE's acute south east hospital network, which is in line with key objectives set in its capital plan. It will help facilitate the provision of training and development opportunities for members of multidisciplinary teams and professional staff.

Minister Martin Cullen said "I am delighted to lay the foundation stone for this significant expansion project at Waterford Regional Hospital. By providing state-of-the-art teaching facilities, we are not only benefiting students — allowing them to further develop their clinical training and independent study — but also

the staff at WRH and healthcare professionals throughout this entire region. This in turn will further enhance the delivery of healthcare services in the south east which will ultimately benefit local communities."

Richard Dooley, south east hospital network manager with the Health Service Executive, said "Medical education is a process of lifelong learning that puts patients first, delivers the outcomes of the health service's transformation programme, and enables professionals to expand and fulfil their potential. The HSE is pleased to be financing close to 50 per cent of this project in a partnership arrangement with the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. Turning the sod paves the way for a facility that will reflect what the public expect, and rightly so, that they receive care from practitioners who are up-to-date in their knowledge, thinking and skills."

Kilkenny cats get stamp of approval

BY NAOISE O' DONOVAN COOGAN

KILKENNY SENIOR hurlers have been honoured once again but this time it is with a new stamp.

An Post has issued the first feline postage stamps which will feature four varieties of cats.

Award-winning political cartoonist Martyn Turner was hired to design comic modern day caricatures of feline pets.

Martyn Turner is a graduate of Queens University, Belfast, a former magazine editor and he has published 17 books. He is best known for his work as a political cartoonist spanning 30 years and most particularly

for The Irish Times.

The stamps which will cost 55 cents and 78 cents each will feature the artist's impressions of a Kilkenny cat, a Celtic tigress, a fat cat and a pair of cool cats.

These stamps are sure to be bestsellers as highly prized collectors' items and An Post expects strong interest from

cat lovers and those who appreciate Martyn Turner's unique artistry and comic style depiction of the Celtic Cat.

The new stamps are available from Main Post Offices, online from www.irishstamps.ie (new window) or from the Philatelic Shop, GPO, Dublin 1