

Stepdad stuck 50 needles in toddler

RIO DE JANEIRO: A two-year-old Brazilian boy suffering from 50 needles stuck everywhere inside his body was the victim of a "black magic" ritual performed by his stepfather, police said yesterday.

The stepfather, Roberto Carlos Magalhaes, broke down and confessed after being arrested earlier in the day, the police chief in charge of the investigation, Helder Fernandes Santana, said.

"He did that for revenge, to get back at his wife. His mistress told him to kill the child through a macabre ritual," said Santana by telephone from the northeastern town of Ibotirama, in Bahia State.

The toddler, who could not be named because of his young age, remained in intensive care in a hospital in the nearby town of Barreiras, where he was admitted on Sunday by his mother after

vomiting and complaining of stomach pain.

X-rays showed around 50 metal sewing needles inside his body, including his neck, torso and legs.

Surprised doctors who treated the boy said they knew immediately the needles had not been swallowed but inserted deliberately, one by one.

He is conscious but in a "serious" condition, hospital spokeswoman Kelly Bessa said. "One needle perforated a lung, and he is weak. We drained the area and he is on a drip."

She said doctors were deciding whether it would be safe to operate to remove "the needles that are closest to vital organs — but that might be more dangerous than just leaving them in".

The mother, Maria Souza Santos,

38, told the newspaper *A Tarde de Salvador de Bahia* that she believed her son had been the victim of a black magic rite.

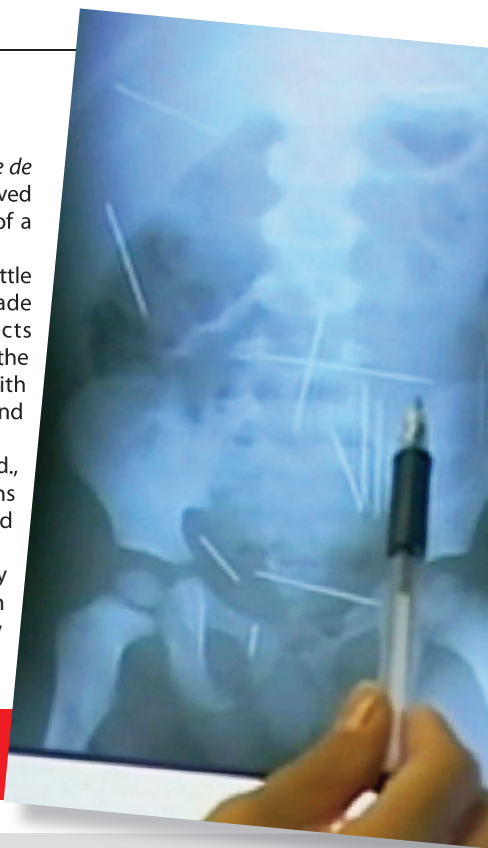
She said she had found a bottle of *cachaca*, Brazilian rum made from sugar cane, and objects used for such ceremonies in the modest house she shared with her six children, her mother and Magalhaes.

Souza Santos works as a maid, and her husband of six months worked as a fisherman and labourer.

Although Brazil is a largely Catholic country, superstition and animist cults exist, mainly in the poorer northern regions.

— AFP

SLOW AND PAINFUL: An X-ray shows the needles inside the child's body — APpic



Church poster of Mary and Joseph in bed sparks anger

WELLINGTON: A church billboard showing an apparently naked Virgin Mary and Joseph in bed together has sparked the ire of conservative Christians in New Zealand.

On the poster, a sad-looking Joseph lies next to Mary, whose face is turned heavenwards under the words: "Poor Joseph. God was a hard act to follow."

The display was erected outside the progressive St Matthew-in-the-City church in Auckland last Thursday.

St Matthews's vicar, Archdeacon Glynn Cardy, said the billboard was meant to challenge stereotypes about the way Jesus was conceived. "It is intended to challenge stereotypes about the way that Jesus was conceived and get people talking about the Christmas story." — AFP

IT'S BACK TO ENGLISH

Hong Kong Chinese schools change their language policy

HONG KONG: The number of secondary schools teaching in English here will almost double in September when the changes to language instruction policy take effect, according to school profiles released by the government the *South China Morning Post* reported on Tuesday.

Taking advantage of the latest changes in language policy, 16 schools which are now teaching in Chinese will switch to teaching entirely in English. Another 80 schools will adopt a mixed approach — using Chinese for humanities subjects but using English for science subjects. Seven schools will do the opposite by switching at least some classes from English to Chinese.

This means 199 schools, or nearly half of the 402 secondary schools in Hong Kong, will be teaching fully or mainly in English.

This is the second turnaround of the medium of instruction adopted in local schools. The government adopted the mother-tongue policy in 1998 when all but selected secondary schools



SWITCH: The number of secondary schools teaching English in Hong Kong will almost double by September next year

were ordered to switch their medium of instruction to Chinese. At present, 110 schools teach entirely in English.

In 2006, the authorities announced that schools could teach a class in English if 85 per cent of students in that class were in the top 40 per cent of their age group academically. Schools whose students learn mainly in Chinese could use English for up to a quarter of lesson time to promote "extended learning activities".

The policy will start from Form One students in the next academic year.

Many schools said they made the switch because of an appeal from parents. Ho Kit-to, principal of Shun Tak Fraternal Association Tam Pak Yu College in Tuen Mun, one of the 80 schools using the mixed approach, said: "Many schools, including us, made the switch because of the market or parents' demand."

Another school which will soon join the ranks of English-medium

schools is Yuen Long Lutheran Secondary School, which has been teaching in Chinese for 50 years. Principal Belinda Chan Yuen-chau said: "Our students are quite ready for this and the school is well prepared."

Yim Chin-ming, principal of TWGH Lo Kon Ting Memorial College in Yuen Long, said: "We have been waiting to switch back to English-medium since 1998.

"Until the handover, we taught in English and the school never really wanted to switch to Chinese. Almost everyone in the school is delighted with the change."

Michael Tien Puk-sun, former chairman of the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research who is critical of the new policy, said: "These schools switching to English-medium teaching are the first nail in the coffin for mother-tongue education. In the end, Chinese-medium teaching in junior secondary schools is going to be wiped out altogether."

Seven English-medium schools will no longer be allowed to teach entirely in English.

Single-payer health care plan dies in Senate

WASHINGTON: The liberals' longtime dream of a government-run health care system for all died yesterday in the Senate, but Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont vowed it will return when the realisation dawns that private insurance companies "are no longer needed".

The proposal's demise came as Senate Democratic leaders and the White House sought agreement with Senator Ben Nelson to become the 60th supporter of President Barack Obama's health care overhaul — the number needed to overcome a Republican filibuster.

Nelson has met three times in the past nine days with Obama. His Nebraska-based chief of staff, Tim Becker, spent the day in Washington in discussions with administration officials on details of recent negotiations between his boss and the president. — AP

Court splits jackpot between rival gamblers

TOULOUSE: A French court has split the jackpot from a casino slot machine between the woman who put in the money and the man who pulled the lever, ending months of argument between the two.

Marie-Helene Jarguel walked off with over €2 million (RM9.95 million) in March after a bet of €50 on a one-armed bandit, only for her gambling partner Francis Sune to contest her gain based on the fact that he activated the machine.

A court in the southwestern city of Montpellier ruled on Tuesday that Jarguel should keep 80 per cent of the earnings while the rest should go to Sune, a judicial source said.

The ruling was a legal innovation. The judges noted that there was "no judicial definition of the winner in a slot machine game." — Reuters

White Americans' majority to end by mid-century

WASHINGTON: The estimated time when whites will no longer make up the majority of Americans has been pushed back eight years — to 2050 — because the recession and stricter immigration policies have slowed the flow of foreigners into the US.

Census Bureau figures released yesterday update last year's prediction that white children would become a minority in 2023 and the overall white population would follow in 2042. The earlier estimate did not take into account a drop in the number of people moving into the US because of the economic crisis and the immigration policies imposed after the Sept 11, 2001, terror attacks.

The 2050 estimate is one of four projections released that is based on rates for births and deaths and a scenario in which immigration continues its more recent, slower pace of adding nearly one million new foreigners each year. — AP

Britain bounces cheques after 300 years

LONDON: After more than three centuries, the humble cheque is set to become a historic relic after British banks voted to phase it out in favour of more modern payment methods.

The board of the UK Payments Council, the body for setting payment strategy in Britain, agreed yesterday to set a target date of Oct 31, 2018, for winding up the cheque clearing system. The board is largely made up of Britain's leading banks.

"There are many more efficient ways of making payments than by paper in the 21st century, and the time is ripe for the economy as a whole to reap the benefits of its replacement," Paul Smees, the council chief executive, said in a statement.

The use of cheques has fallen drastically in the past 10 years as more consumers transfer money electronically. — Reuters