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LEADING ARTICLES

Cardiac transplantation 1979.....	69	Drugs in threatened preterm labour.....	71
Drinking and drowning.....	70	Common waiting lists.....	71

PAPERS AND ORIGINALS

Regular Review: Continuous lumbar epidural analgesia for labour and delivery J SELWYN CRAWFORD.....	72
Possible effect of time on renal allograft rejection M S KNAPP, J R COVE-SMITH, R DUGDALE, N MACKENZIE, R POWNALL.....	75
Metabolic consequences of atenolol and propranolol in treatment of essential hypertension J L DAY, N SIMPSON, J METCALFE, R L PAGE.....	77
Bacteriological quality control in human milk-banking A LUCAS, C D ROBERTS.....	80
Detection of deep venous thrombosis by scanning of ^{99m} technetium-labelled red-cell venous pool W BESWICK, R CHMIEL, R BOOTH, I VELLAR, E GILFORD, C N CHESTERMAN.....	82
Value of examining buffy coats for intragranulocytic micro-organisms in patients with fever JEAN-PAUL STUDER, MICHEL P GLAUSER, MARC SCHAPIRA.....	85
Disappearance of spermatozoa from ejaculate after vasectomy R P MARWOOD, VALERIE BERAL.....	87
Non-motile sperms persisting after vasectomy: do they matter? IAN S EDWARDS, JOHN L FARLOW.....	87
Time and tides in Graves's disease: their implications in predicting outcome of treatment T J WILKIN, J SWANSON BECK, J CROOKS, T E ISLES, A GUNN.....	88
Address card for obtaining accurate addresses of clinic patients K V KRISHNASWAMI, M C SATAGOPAN, P R SOMASUNDARAM, S P TRIPATHY, S RADHAKRISHNA, WALLACE FOX.....	89
Osteomyelitis due to Streptococcus equisimilis (group C) C M ASPLIN, N J BEECHING, MARY P E SLACK.....	89
Electroconvulsive therapy for patient with cardiac pacemaker P JAUHAR, M WELLER, S R HIRSCH.....	90
Abdominal and thoracic pressures during defaecation S S FEDAIL, RICHARD F HARVEY, C J BURNS-COX.....	91
Unusual complication after suprapubic bladder puncture T KALAGER, A DIGRANES.....	91
Trial of doxantrazole in asthma H R GRIBBIN, J E HARVEY, A E TATTERSFIELD.....	92

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Cardiac transplantation in 150 patients at Stanford University STUART W JAMIESON, EDWARD B STINSON, NORMAN E SHUMWAY.....	93
Califano's five-year health plan BARBARA J CULLITON, WALLACE K WATERFALL.....	96
How to take a clinical examination J F STOKES.....	98
Restrictions on NHS prescribing in Australia TONY SMITH.....	99
Pedestrian accidents BY A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.....	101
ABC of Ophthalmology: Visual difficulty in old age P A GARDINER.....	105
Crises down under PETER C ARNOLD.....	107
Medicine and Books.....	109
Any Questions?.....	95, 97, 100, 108
Materia Non Medica—Contributions from A B JONES, P D SIMMONS, WILLIAM BENNEY.....	104
Medicine and the Media.....	148
Personal View BEULAH R BEWLEY.....	119
Correction: A mantle of safety: the 50th year of the Royal Flying Doctor Service J C SHEARMAN, ALLAN LIMMER.....	108

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents.....	120
--------------------------------------	-----

OBITUARY.....	132
---------------	-----

NEWS AND NOTES

Views.....	135
Epidemiology—Food poisoning of unknown cause from canned food.....	136
Medical New Year Honours.....	136
Medical News.....	137
BMA Notices.....	138
Instructions to authors.....	138

SUPPLEMENT

The Week.....	139
Negligence and defence.....	140
GMSC: Evidence on way to Review Body.....	142
Revised career structure: first priority.....	144
Pay beds in the NHS.....	146

CORRESPONDENCE

A matter of language? Surely not Lord Smith of Marlow, FRCS.....	120	Intermittent ophthalmoplegia J F Falconer Smith, MRCP.....	124	The troubles at Normansfield J F Rickards, FFARCS.....	127
Nursing at a crossroads I G Schraibman, FRCS.....	121	Possible environmental hazards of gas cooking H R Hosein, MD, and A Bouhuys, MD.....	125	Clinical medical officers G V Lewis, MRCS, and others.....	128
Severe hyponatraemia in hospital inpatients C N McCollum, FRCS; P G E Kennedy, MRCP, and others.....	121	Ankylosing spondylitis in HLA-B27-positive individuals: use in diagnosis F T Christiansen, MB, and others.....	125	Staffing of accident and emergency departments J Kotowski, MB.....	128
Seat belts and the safe car W H Rutherford, FRCS; J A E Primrose, FRCS.....	122	Another hazard of pierced ears Dilys A Noble, MB.....	125	Peripheral hospitals and the new career structure R T Booth, FRCOG.....	128
Dialysis and transplantation and the quality of life P F Naish, MRCP.....	122	Polymyalgia rheumatica and primary biliary cirrhosis G F Batstone, MRCPATH, and others.....	125	Part-time contracts for women doctors P J Graham, FRCP.....	128
Drug treatment of psychiatric patients in general practice I H McKee, MB; J Y Mathew, FRACP.....	123	Precordial exercise mapping S Talbot, MRCP.....	126	Taxation of car and telephone expenses F W Wright, FRCR.....	128
"Lecture Notes on Medical Statistics" J F Osborn, PHD.....	123	Training in internal fixation of fractures R S M Ling, FRCS.....	126	Consultant mileage allowances J A T Duncan, FFARCS.....	129
Reusing dialysers R Ahmad, MB, and J Hussler, SRN.....	123	"Therapy Options in Psychiatry" F H Creed, MRCPsych, and Gillian Waldron, MRCPsych.....	126	Who will follow the juniors now? G W Taylor, MB.....	129
Tranquillisers and plasma prolactin J D Wilson, MRCP, and others.....	123	What is a cohort? V H Springett, FRCP.....	126	Anaesthetists' manpower and staffing A R Rogers, MB.....	130
Drug compliance and the elderly patient G H C Jenkins, MB.....	124	Tetracycline preparations for children P G Brock, MB, and Maryanne Roach, BSc.....	126	Pathologists' work load G S Andrews, FRCPATH.....	130
Pneumomediastinum in anorexia nervosa A P Brooks, MRCP, and C N Martyn, MB.....	124	Treatment of spasmodic torticollis with diazepam S Ahmad, MRCP, and M K Meeran, MD.....	127	Points from Letters An objectionable application form (H G Easton); Treatment of accidental hypothermia (Mary C MacInnes); Do all pregnant women need iron? (A W Fowler); How to do it (K V Bailey); Sweating feet (D I Porter and R P R Dawber); Bagpipes and pneumomediastinum in anorexia nervosa (J How and P D Bewsher); Hydronephrosis (R H Whitaker); Phantom limb pain (G T Watts); Recurrent vaginal candida infection (C R Porteous); Sex and the Church (R J D Coffey); A national medical service (G P Walsh); Normansfield and the NHS (G T Watts).....	130
Toilet paper and spread of infection J H S Pettit, FRCP.....	124	BPAS and AID B Sandler, MD.....	127		
Rapid diagnosis of Mycoplasma pneumoniae infection: a reminder J T Macfarlane, MRCP, and I A Neale, BM.....	124	DIY blood-pressure machines J R D Brown, MRCP, and others.....	127		
		Influence of diphenylhydantoin on the effect of streptozotocin L Korányi, MD, and L Gero, MD.....	127		

We may return unduly long letters to the author for shortening so that we can offer readers as wide a selection as possible. We receive so many letters each week that we have to omit some of them. Letters must be signed personally by all their authors. We cannot acknowledge their receipt unless a stamped addressed envelope or an international reply coupon is enclosed.

A matter of language? Surely not

SIR,—Your leading article "Not the language of medicine" (6 January, p 2) raises a point of considerable general interest, though few members would identify this from the somewhat obscure title and others might well be deflected from it in wrongly concluding that the issue was one of freedom to express an honestly held opinion. On this point surely the *BMJ* and I are as one. In medicine, as in any other profession, freedom to disagree and, by expressing disagreement, to try to alter whatever it is that has aroused disagreement is all-important to the survival of a free profession. But how and to whom, assuming that one has chosen to join a society, should one express disagreement if one wishes to alter its policies for the better? This is the issue.

Perhaps I might illustrate my own opinion on this point, which I believe many would share, by saying this. Nobody who knows me at all, let alone those who know me well, could possibly describe me as a conformer. I admit to a restless temperament frequently seeking to improve things and have therefore all my life been an arguer, a protester, a writer of memoranda to ginger up presidents, secre-

taries, or chairmen of committees—in other words, quite often a nuisance at times and (I freely admit it) perhaps an embarrassing nuisance. Indeed, during the war many of my friends told me that I argued so much with higher authority that I should probably be out of the army and back in civilian practice earlier than any of them—but through a court martial. But—and herein lies the point—having for around 40 years been a member of many medical societies and, of course, a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, which has many differences from a society but the same claim to loyalty from those who accept its privileges, not once in that time have I felt that the right way to impress my views on a governing body was through the press, medical or otherwise.

My assaults were made within the society concerned, trying by persuasion and by logical argument to change the minds of those who governed its affairs. Sometimes I was successful and sometimes not. This is perhaps because some of my ideas were good and some bad, and in retrospect I have no doubt at all that in the past I have at times been saved from

looking foolish by having a suggestion which I considered meritorious turned down by colleagues who were much closer to a problem than I, knew more about it, or, let me admit it, showed better judgment than I. I am, today, eternally grateful that the late Sir Frank Holdsworth once saved me from exhibiting in public a particularly ill-conceived plan in regard to higher surgical training, which at the time I had regarded as a stroke of genius.

On some of these occasions I experienced resentment and it would have been the simplest thing in the world to say to myself, "Let me attract the attention of a much wider medical audience" (and of course one even less in touch with the details of the issue) "by writing a persuasive (and one-sided) letter to the press." I am glad now that I can look back and say that I never once succumbed to this temptation, for I feel that it is quite wrong. Of course one could construct a situation in which a society is behaving in a manner so against the interests of the public and the profession that a doctor, denied any hearing within the society, feels that he must call general attention to a dangerous situation. I know of no example which I can cite and I remain convinced that for practical purposes a doctor, by his own choice a member of a society, not only accepts certain privileges but acquires certain responsibilities—one of them being that, with the exception of the largely theoretical case mentioned above, he should avoid trying to produce change in the society by castigating it in public. To do so is never less than dis-