

# BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

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## LEADING ARTICLES

Alopecia areata.....	505	Proteinuria at high altitude.....	508
Bombs and hospitals.....	506	Cancer after cardiac transplantation .....	509
Is there a hyperkinetic syndrome?.....	506	General practice evolution.....	509
The physicians' dilemma.....	507		

## PAPERS AND ORIGINALS

<b>Hospital resuscitation from ventricular fibrillation in Brighton</b>	
A F MACKINTOSH, MARGARET E CRABB, HELEN BRENNAN, J H WILLIAMS, D A CHAMBERLAIN.....	511
<b>Current required for ventricular defibrillation</b> J N PATTON, J F PANTRIDGE.....	513
<b>Prediction of gall-stone pancreatitis by computer</b> D F GRAHAM, FRANCES J WYLLIE.....	515
<b>Evaluation of ultra-short dialysis</b> J A P TRAFFORD, P SHARPSTONE, R EVANS, R IRELAND.....	518
<b>Sodium retention and hypertension with short dialysis</b> L SELLARS, V ROBSON, R WILKINSON.....	520
<b>Dopamine pretreatment in unstable kidney donors</b> A T RAFTERY, R W G JOHNSON.....	522
<b>Hypercalcaemia induced by oestrogen withdrawal in vitamin D-treated hypoparathyroidism</b>	
D VERBELEN, M FUSS .....	522
<b>Probable toxic necrosis after prolonged fluspirilene administration</b>	
R G MCCREADIE, W E S KIERNAN, R M VENNOR, R B DENHOLM.....	523
<b>Minocycline-induced acute interstitial nephritis</b> ROWAN G WALKER, NAPIER M THOMSON, JOHN P DOWLING, CHISHOLM S OGG..	524

## MEDICAL PRACTICE

<b>Diagnosis and management of brain death</b> MARKKU KASTE, MATTI HILLBOM, JORMA PALO.....	525
<b>Prescription for a better British diet</b> R PASSMORE, DOROTHY F HOLLINGSWORTH, JEAN ROBERTSON.....	527
<b>How to talk to a reporter</b> TONY SMITH.....	531
<b>Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals</b>	
INTERNATIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE OF MEDICAL EDITORS .....	532
<b>Any Questions?</b> .....	542
<b>Medicine and Books</b> .....	536
<b>Medicine and the Media</b> .....	541
<b>Personal View</b> B GATOFF.....	542

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PROCUREMENT SECTION  
CURRENT SERIAL RECORDS

<b>CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents</b> .....	546
--	-----

<b>OBITUARY</b> .....	543
-----------------------	-----

## NEWS AND NOTES

<b>Views</b> .....	560
<b>Epidemiology—Toxoplasmosis in Scotland 1974-7</b> .....	561
<b>Parliament—Mental Health (Amendment) Bill</b> .....	561
<b>Medical News</b> .....	562
<b>BMA Notices</b> .....	563
<b>Instructions to authors</b> .....	563

## SUPPLEMENT

<b>GP Charter Working Group Report</b> .....	564
<b>GMSC: New Charter for GPs</b> .....	568
<b>HJSC: Direct negotiations on pay</b> .....	571

# CORRESPONDENCE

## Action on alcohol

A M Marshall, BSC, and A L Wright, BSC;  
G A C Binnie, MRCP; L M Shirlaw, MRCP;  
D A Roche, MB; Gwen D Molloy, JP..... 546

## Fatal accidents on non-gritted roads

P J Tomlin, FFARCS..... 547

## McMaster revisited

W D Morton; G J Fraenkel, FRACS..... 547

## Automatic blood-gas analysers

Patricia M Tweeddale, PHD..... 547

## Priorities in road accidents

N Hasnain, MB; A J R Waterston, MRCP;  
R Guest, MB; J Beveridge, MB; J C Allen,  
MB; C P Mayers, MRCPATH..... 548

## Road accidents and legal sanctions

E Hoffman, FRCS..... 548

## Motorcycle and bicycle accidents

K J Watson, MB..... 549

## Variations in number of births and perinatal mortality by day of week

M J V Bull, MRCP..... 549

## Return to work after coronary artery surgery for angina

I M Graham, MRCP, and others..... 549

## Malnutrition in infants receiving cult diets

Erica F Wheeler, MPHIL; M J T Dalton,  
MRCS, and others..... 549

## The Queensland Melanoma Project

D W Hedley, MRCP..... 550

## Are they being served?

A Morris, MP; A Whitehead, PHD..... 550

## Acute poisoning with Distalgesic

J M Gumpel, MRCP..... 551

## Storage and cooking of poultry

A E Wright, FRCPATH, and A Withnell, MD... 551

## How to use a library

P J Bishop; E M Edward, ALA..... 551

## How to choose and use a calculator

H A F Dudley, FRCS; M J Ball, MFCM..... 552

## A "side benefit" of metronidazole?

Susan Wood, MB, and others..... 552

## Non-motile sperms after vasectomy: do they matter?

J P Blandy, FRCS, and others; P M  
Hendy-Ibbs; R H Whitaker, FRCS..... 552

## Detection of deep venous thrombosis by <sup>99m</sup>Tc-labelled red-cell scans

P C Chan, FRCS, and others..... 552

## No more textbooks on primary care?

D Brooks, FRCGP..... 553

## Hazards of fiberoptic bronchoscopy

P R W Lanham, FFARCS; R Stalker, MD, and  
R L Ward, FRCP..... 553

## Antinuclear factor in patients on prazosin

J D Wilson, FRCPA, and others..... 553

## Treatment and survival in advanced breast cancer

S Tsiliacos, MD, and A Athanasios, MD... 554

## Synovial biopsy in arthritis

M A Edgar, FRCS..... 554

## Epidemiology and public health in American universities

R M Acheson, FRCP..... 554

## Abortion and the NHS

A D Noble, FRCS; C L Brewer, MRCPsych,  
and P J Huntingford, FRCOG; D Flint;  
R A Binning, FFARCS..... 554

## Industrial anarchy in the NHS

R T Marcus, FRCS; C G Parsons, MD..... 555

## Conspiracy of silence?

J C Angell, FRCS..... 556

## Nursing at a crossroads

H K E Browning; I G Schraibman, FRCS;  
Pamela M Jefferies..... 556

## PPP plan for BMA members

J G W Gelling, MBA..... 556

## Revised career structure: first priority

H R Vickers, FRCP..... 556

## Fee for service or capitation fee?

K C Harvey, MRCP..... 557

## New consultant contract and women senior registrars

I J Nuala Sterling, MRCP; D L McLellan,  
MRCP..... 557

## Safety in clinical laboratories

M A Buttolph, PHD..... 557

## Trade unionism in medicine

R E Dreaper, MB..... 558

**Points** Acute poisoning with Distalgesic (W M Mackean; L Ratoff); Malnutrition in infants receiving cult diets (A Long); Treatment of tuberculosis (M C Wilkinson); Rugby injuries of the hand (Rosemary H M Adams); Menetrier's disease (J D Matthews, and R J Winney); Doctors, physiotherapists, and placebo pharmacology (Ingrid Cushion); Ataloia fever (W A Heaton-Ward); Proctalgia (H de Glanville); Phosphorescent bacteria (N P Warren); Microscopic words (S Selwyn); Wine and diabetes (B Ode); Medical authors (R S F Schilling); Eye symptoms and urgency (M W Paterson); Ophthalmic services in the NHS (J L Reis); Reimbursement of pension premiums (R D Last); How should a consultant spend his time? (M Fiorentino); Dextrostix on prescription? (P W Short); Accident and emergency services (M J Leverton); The drift towards trade unionism (D L M McNeill)..... 558

## Correction: Tetracycline preparations in children

NATHAN..... 559

*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.*

## Action on alcohol

SIR,—We write in response to Professor R E Kendell's paper (10 February, p 367) "Alcoholism: a medical or a political problem?"

Papers quoted by Professor Kendell tend to conclude that as alcohol consumption increases so does the incidence of many alcohol-related problems, examples being public drunkenness, hospital admissions for alcoholism, and deaths from cirrhosis. In connection with the latter Professor Kendell refers to work by Schmidt,<sup>1</sup> who showed that during a 20-year period (1954-73) there was a correlation factor of 0.98 between the rising alcohol consumption per caput and the rising mortality from cirrhosis. Support for the above statement can be drawn

from your leading article (23-30 December, p 1733), in which it was stated that an alcohol consumption of 170 g per day for 25 years would give a 50% chance of developing cirrhosis. However, Schmidt goes on to correlate mortality from cirrhosis with per caput consumption of alcohol over one particular year. We fail to see how this correlation can have any clinical value in view of the number of years it takes to develop alcoholic cirrhosis. Similarly, the statement by Professor Kendell that "a country's mortality from cirrhosis may be used as a fairly reliable indicator of its alcohol consumption if the latter is unknown" may be statistically sound, but we fail to see any reason why

average alcohol consumption for a single year should correlate with that year's mortality from a disease which takes many years to develop.

In conclusion, is the use of correlation in medicine always valid—bearing in mind the well-known example given in undergraduate training of a good correlation between the incidence of myocardial infarction and the number of television licences in the UK over a certain period?

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<sup>1</sup> Schmidt, W, in *Alcoholism: New Knowledge and New Responses*, ed G Edwards and M Grant, p 15. London, Croom Helm, 1977.

SIR,—The reduction in prevalence of alcoholism is most certainly a political problem, as pointed out in Professor R E Kendell's Morison lecture (10 February, p 367).

We have, however, the ludicrous situation