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CURRENT SERIAL RECORDS

## LEADING ARTICLES

**Intermittent Intravenous Methohexitone** page 525 **Invasion of Privacy** page 526 **Immunization against Rubella** page 527 **Research into Calcium Metabolism** page 528 **Nephrotic Syndrome in Adults** page 529 **The Paterson-Kelly Lesion** page 530 **Aberdeen Meeting** page 530

## PAPERS AND ORIGINALS

- Rubella Vaccine Trial in Children** I. B. HILLARY, P. N. MEENAN, A. H. GRIFFITH, C. C. DRAPER, AND G. D. LAURENCE..... 531
- Nephrotic Syndrome Due to Primary Renal Disease in Adults: I. Survey of Incidence in South-east England**  
P. SHARPSTONE, C. S. OGG, AND J. S. CAMERON..... 533
- Nephrotic Syndrome Due to Primary Renal Disease in Adults: II. A Controlled Trial of Prednisolone and Azathioprine**  
P. SHARPSTONE, C. S. OGG, AND J. S. CAMERON..... 535
- Physiological Responses to Intermittent Methohexitone for Conservative Dentistry**  
C. C. WISE, JOHN S. ROBINSON, M. J. HEATH, AND P. J. TOMLIN..... 540
- Malabsorption of Folate Polyglutamates in Tropical Sprue**  
A. V. HOFFBRAND, T. F. NECHELES, N. MALDONADO, E. HORTA, AND R. SANTINI..... 543
- Acidaemia and Salicylate Poisoning in Adults** A. T. PROUDFOOT AND S. S. BROWN..... 547
- Effect of Frusemide on Pulmonary Blood Volume**  
M. L. BHATIA, INDER SINGH, S. C. MANCHANDA, P. K. KHANNA, AND SUJOY B. ROY..... 551

## PRELIMINARY COMMUNICATIONS

- Oral Phenylalanine and Tyrosine Tolerance Tests in Parkinsonian Patients**  
J. BRAHAM, IDA SAROVA-PINHAS, M. CRISPIN, R. GOLAN, N. LEVIN, AND A. SZEINBERG..... 552

## MEDICAL MEMORANDA

- Anterior Interosseous Nerve Palsy** R. H. B. MILLS, K. MUKHERJEE, AND I. B. BASSETT..... 555
- Cytogenetic Remission in Acute Transformation of Chronic Granulocytic Leukaemia**  
O. MARGARET GARSON, M. A. BURGESS, AND LORRAINE G. STANLEY..... 556

## MIDDLE ARTICLES

- Cadaveric Kidneys for Transplantation** R. Y. CALNE 565
- Conferences and Meetings**
- Control of Tropical Endemic Disease—Anglo-French Symposium..... 568
- Premalignant Lesions Affecting the Mouth, Pharynx, and Larynx..... 570
- Personal View** A. WHITE FRANKLIN ..... 571

## CLINICOPATHOLOGICAL CONFERENCE

- The Case of the Persistent Pituitary**..... 557

## NEWS AND NOTES

- Epidemiology** ..... 582
- Medical News** ..... 583

## CURRENT PRACTICE

- Today's Drugs** Thyroid Hormones..... 561
- Any Questions?** ..... 582

## BOOK REVIEWS..... 563

## CORRESPONDENCE ..... 572

## OBITUARY NOTICES..... 579

## SUPPLEMENT

- Annual Meeting, Aberdeen: Programme**..... 97
- Scottish Council** ..... 105
- Scottish Committee for Hospital Medical Services**... 106
- Motions for A.R.M.** ..... 111

# Correspondence

Letters to the Editor should not exceed 500 words.

<b>Publication of Patients' Names</b> R. E. W. Fisher, D.P.H.; J. E. H. Cogan, M.B. ....572	<b>Disodium Cromoglycate in Treatment of Asthma</b> J. M. Smith, F.R.C.P.ED. ....574	<b>"Kwok's Quease" in Britain</b> R. A. R. Wallace, F.R.C.S. ....577
<b>Multiple Choice Examinations</b> W. F. M. Wallace, M.D.; J. N. Hawthorne, D.Sc.; W. K. Cowan, M.D. ....572	<b>Topical Corticosteroids</b> A. D. G. Gunn, D.P.H. ....574	<b>Junior Staff and the B.M.A.</b> J. F. G. Pigott, M.B., and Katharine F. Bradley, M.B. ....577
<b>Acute Infective Gastroenteritis</b> Mary J. Wilmers, F.R.C.P., and others ....573	<b>Pin or Prosthesis?</b> M. B. Devas, F.R.C.S.; H. N. Burwell, F.R.C.S.; R. Barnes, F.R.C.S. ....575	<b>University Teachers' Pay</b> E. A. Smith, Ph.D., M.R.C.P.GLASG. ....577
<b>Future of Clinical Pharmacology</b> R. J. Ancill, Ph.D., M.D., and D. A. Norton, F.P.S. ....573	<b>Drug Names</b> A. P. Launchbury, M.P.S. ....575	<b>Difficulties of Regional Consultants</b> J. J. Shipman, F.R.C.S. ....577
<b>Haemoglobin C in a Spanish Family</b> Angela Casado and others ....574	<b>Diagnosis of Suspected or Occult Pulmonary Embolus</b> J. D. Cash, M.R.C.P.ED., and others ....576	<b>Budgeting in the N.H.S.</b> D. Hutchison, M.B. ....577
<b>"Chronic" Haemodialysis</b> J. de Swiet, F.R.C.P. ....574	<b>Cyclophosphamide and the Nephrotic Syndrome</b> K. N. Drummond, F.R.C.P.(C.) ....576	<b>Reorganization of N.H.S.</b> R. E. Steel, D.P.M. ....578

## Publication of Patients' Names

SIR,—On the wireless on 22 May I was shocked to hear the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* admit that he had carefully decided to publish the names of the recipient and the donor of a transplanted heart, despite the pleading of the doctors and the relatives that he should exercise some human pity and preserve silence. He said that it was in the public interest that the names should be published, and he claimed that this did not mean the satisfaction of mere morbid curiosity. But he could not explain what this public interest was, and obviously resented being asked.

I am not writing about the merits of heart transplant surgery. Some doctors consider it to be justified, some do not. I cannot think, however, that any doctor could approve of the action of the *Daily Telegraph*. Although it was plain that its editor could not understand the appeals that were made to him, there is one form of argument he is unlikely to misunderstand. I have therefore cancelled my order for the *Daily Telegraph*. Other doctors, hospitals, and medical organizations might think about it.—I am, etc.,

Halstead, Essex.

R. E. W. FISHER.

in protest, and I hope my medical colleagues who are in sympathy with my feelings will do the same. I am not one to protest easily, and I enjoy, and have enjoyed, the *Daily Telegraph* for 30 years, but this abuse of medical privacy is beyond the pale, and I cannot do otherwise than to cancel my subscription.—I am, etc.,

Tunbridge Wells,  
Kent.

JOHN COGAN.

## Multiple Choice Examinations

SIR,—Dr. Bernard Towers in his pungent *Personal View* (17 May, p. 443) strongly condemns the use in our medical schools of "spot" and multiple choice question examinations and rightly points out their potential disadvantages. However, his alternative suggestion also seems open to grave abuses: "If they can defeat me in knowledge and argument I give them starred firsts and regard the system as working well." This is likely to be satisfactory when examining honours candidates, but is it fair to the middle-of-the-road man who will make a reasonably competent doctor but who may fail his exams and spend a miserable year resitting because he did not get on the examiner's wavelength?

With regard to written examinations, there is definite evidence that the use of essay questions—with the best will in the world—leads to serious variations in standard. Bull<sup>1</sup> reviewed the problem in 1956 and found that when an essay-type question in final medicine was re-marked by the same examiner after an interval of several weeks the result changed from pass to fail or fail to pass in the case of no fewer than eight students out

of thirty. Admittedly this was one question only, but it is easy to see how a "run" of unfavourable markings could fail a student who ought to have passed. This is the situation which multiple choice questions were designed to avoid.

Probably the best solution at present is to use a combination of multiple choice questions with some other form of examination—for example, essay questions, oral, clinical—as is done by the Royal College of Physicians of London.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, constant efforts should be made to improve the standard of multiple choice questions.—I am, etc.,

WILLIAM F. M. WALLACE.

Physiology Department,  
Queen's University,  
Belfast.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Bull, G. M., *Lancet*, 1956, 2, 368.
- <sup>2</sup> Royal College of Physicians of London, *Lancet*, 1967, 2, 1034.

SIR,—In "Personal View" (17 May, p. 443) Dr. Bernard Towers made some entertaining and valid criticisms of multiple choice question tests. It would be a pity, however, if your readers mistook his jolly little article for a reasoned examination of the M.C.Q. method as applied to the teaching of large medical classes.

Dr. Towers says that as a university teacher and examiner he tries to encourage his pupils to think and argue. He continues: "If they can defeat me in knowledge and argument I give them starred firsts and regard the system as working well." It would be interesting to know exactly how this assessment is made. In my experience the essay type of question is rarely worded so as to make the student do more than regurgitate factual knowledge. Examination papers of this type usually