

BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

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SATURDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 1976

LEADING ARTICLES

Screening for cervical cancer.....	659	Pathogenesis and epidemiology of	
Amenorrhoea after oral contraceptives.....	660	schizophrenia	662
How long dead?.....	661	Nuclear-powered pacemakers.....	663
Transfusing white cells.....	662	Postoperative pain	664

PAPERS AND ORIGINALS

Comparative study of ultrasound, ¹³¹ I-19-iodocholesterol scintigraphy, and aortography in localising adrenal lesions H KEHLET, M BLICHERT-TOFT, S HANCKE, J FOG PEDERSEN, J KVIST KRISTENSEN, F EFSSEN, H DIGE-PETERSEN, J FOGH, K LOCKWOOD, E HASNER.....	665
Overnight urinary 11-hydroxycorticosteroid estimations in diagnosis of Cushing's syndrome D MATTINGLY, CHRISTINE TYLER.....	668
Enhanced HBsAb production in pathogenesis of fulminant viral hepatitis type B I L WOOLF, N EL SHEIKH, HELEN CULLEN, W M LEE, A L W F EDDLESTON, ROGER WILLIAMS, A J ZUCKERMAN	669
Gastric emptying of solid meals in diabetics J H B SCARPELLO, D C BARBER, R V HAGUE, D R CULLEN, G E SLADEN.....	671
The ¹⁴ C-glycocholate test in diabetic diarrhoea J H B SCARPELLO, R V HAGUE, D R CULLEN, G E SLADEN.....	673
Marcus Gunn phenomenon associated with synkinetic oculopalpebral movements S H MOSAVY, M HORIAT	675
Early antenatal diagnosis of spina bifida in a twin fetus by ultrasonic examination and alpha-fetoprotein estimation STUART CAMPBELL, MICHAEL GRUNDY, JACK D SINGER.....	676
Failure to confirm evidence for existence of two populations with duodenal ulcer R J PRESCOTT, W SIRCUS, C L LAI, S K LAM.....	677
Consumption coagulopathy after intra-amniotic urea M F B GRUNDY, E R CRAVEN.....	677
Effect of cimetidine on lower oesophageal sphincter R J BAILEY, S N SULLIVAN, B R D MACDOUGALL, ROGER WILLIAMS.....	678

MEDICAL PRACTICE

What I would say to the Royal Commission: Maternal and neonatal health—a priority R W BEARD.....	679
Statistics at Square One: XVIII—Correlation T D V SWINSCOW.....	680
Haemophilia A and the blood transfusion service: a Scottish study JOHN D CASH, MARY SPENCELY.....	682
The diastolic dilemma DAVID SHORT.....	685
Deviation from prescribed drug treatment after discharge from hospital D M PARKIN, C R HENNEY, J QUIRK, J CROOKS....	686
Letter from Chicago: Farewell Atlantic City GEORGE DUNEA.....	689
Any Questions?.....	681, 684, 688, 690
Materia Non Medica—Contributions from E H HORTON, WINIFRED HECTOR, SIR DOUGLAS BLACK	691
Personal View ALEX PATON.....	692

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents.....	693
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NEWS AND NOTES

Epidemiology—A death from poliomyelitis.....	709
Medical News—Changes at DHSS	709
BMA Notices—Full-time Medical Teachers and Research Workers Committee	710

OBITUARY NOTICES.....	705
-----------------------	-----

BOOK REVIEWS	707
--------------------	-----

SUPPLEMENT		PROCUREMENT SECTION	
The Week	CURRENT SERIAL RECORDS.....	711	
Hospital Junior Staffs Committee		712	
Association Notices—Ophthalmic Group Committee.....		712	

CORRESPONDENCE

Pressures of work on doctors and family Nina L Essex, MRCP; Joan K Sutherland, MRCP; Frances M Ulyatt, FFARCS.....693	Teaching teaching D J Price, FRCP.....698	Sexual disinhibition with L-tryptophan G P Egan, FRCPsych, and G E M Hamad, MB.....701
School pregnancies D G Collinson, MB; S E Ellison, FRCP; Caroline Woodroffe; N A Chisholm, LRCPE.....694	Postural effect of diazoxide M C Bateson, MRCP.....698	Patients' days G L S Rankin, FRCP; J A Davis, FRCP....701
Cough suppressants for children D M T Gairdner, FRCP; C W F McKean, MB; A H Bacon, MRCP.....695	Risk of haemorrhage in oxytocin stress test K H Ng, FRCS, and W P Wong, FRCS.....698	Community health councils and the public S L Sacks, MB.....701
Nicotine, tobacco substitutes, and smoking habits Sir Clifford Jarrett, BA.....695	Raynaud's disease and oral contraceptives P E M Jarrett, FRCS.....699	Splinter organisations D L Gullick, MB.....701
The elderly in a coronary unit M S N Pathy, FRCP.....696	Space phobia and the "3F syndrome" B Isaacs, FRCPGLAS.....699	BMA representation in hospitals J M Cundy, FFARCS, and W F Whimster, MRCP.....702
Admission of old people to hospital D J Jolley, MRCPsych; F Post, FRCP; S L H Smith, MRCP.....696	"The Forbidden Love" R R N Carvalho, MB.....699	Bureaucratic cancer T B Boulton, FFARCS; P H Lord, FRCS.....702
Fetal activity and fetal wellbeing E Sadovsky, MD.....696	Antibiotics for sore throats J N Stenhouse, MB.....699	Industrial action H L Leaming, FFARCS; Isabel M Gardner, MB; N R M Kay, FRCS.....703
Antibiotics for respiratory illness? H G J Herxheimer, LRCPE; D F Tomlinson.....697	Folate deficiency and neurological disease M I Botez, MD.....699	Consultants' increments I G Grove-White, FFARCS; D C Evered, MD..703
Oestrogens for menopausal flushing E R Broadhurst; A I Kloppe, FRCP.....697	On the waiting list J B Glass, MB.....700	Keeping tabs on trainers H A Thomas, FRCP, and others.....704
Dangers of tinted glasses for driving M J Gilkes, FRCS.....697	Fluorinated corticosteroids on the skin H R Vickers, FRCP.....700	United profession P R J Vickers, FRCS.....704
pH of swimming pools H Gordon, MFCM.....697	Life in Lister's wards V A J Swain, FRCS.....700	Points from letters Drought backache 1976 (J McK Kennedy); Mothering and disease (R S Gillen); Antibiotics and purulent sputum (S F Hewetson); Mastectomy scars (A C Cattanch); Breast-feeding (Katherine M Lawler); Spontaneous explosion of glass door (Jean G Rennie); Cough suppressants for children (Q F Evans); Sign of the times? (B W Perriss).....704
Abortion and maternal deaths I G Chalmers, MRCP.....698	Psychotropic drugs in depot form A R Cook, MRCS, DPM.....700	
	Emergency medical care W J May, MB.....700	
	Thyrotoxicosis induced by iodine in food J C Stewart, FRACP, G I Vidor, FRACP.....701	

Correspondents are urged to write briefly so that readers may be offered as wide a selection of letters as possible. So many are being received that the omission of some is inevitable. Letters should be signed personally by all their authors.

Pressures of work on doctors and family

SIR,—Dr Celia Oakley is right (28 August, p 541) when she says that a more flexible medical training system is needed; she has no evidence for her subsequent assertion that part-time specialist training is unrealistic and would lead to lower standards. Dr Rosemary Rue¹ and Dr Tom Arie² have shown that part-time training (of women) can be outstandingly successful by any standards, both educationally and in terms of patient care. Most women who take up part-time training are highly motivated to keep up with advances in their subject. A minimum commitment is essential to maintain continuity and skills, but there is no evidence that this must be full-time; those dividing their interest between clinical and research work spend less time on either than the full-time clinician or academic. Dr Oakley further asserts that it is a consultant's duty to advance the frontiers of medicine; meaningful research is a highly specialised task not necessarily allied to clinical skills, and most consultants in district general hospitals are too busy looking after their patients to do much frontier-breaking.

If 50% of our medical graduates are to be women, with the potential, if temporary, wastage that the present system creates, it is essential in cost-effective terms to utilise

properly the existing trained medical personnel. This means adapting the system by creating easily available part-time training posts, with part-time consultant or general practice posts as the goal. This is perfectly feasible in almost all specialties, and when expediency has demanded this solution it has been achieved.

That only 3% of the members of college and central policy committees are women probably reflects the small proportion of women at the top of the medical ladder rather than their apathy about committee work. It does, however, mean that the majority of women doctors are not adequately represented at the highest level.

Dr Oakley has achieved her goals in the traditional manner by conforming to a system which demands full-time commitment; her uncompromising approach would deny professional fulfilment to many highly skilled women who elect for a part-time career while their children are young.

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¹ Rue, R, *Lancet*, 1967, 1, 1267.

² Arie, T, *British Medical Journal*, 1976, 2, 641.

SIR,—It has been interesting to read two communications in your journal recently bearing on the complications of combining professional commitments with family responsibilities. With the ever-increasing number of female graduates in medicine and the current pattern in childbearing more and more doctors are likely to have to deal with these complications in the training and service periods of their careers.

The paper by Drs Rita Henryk-Gutt and Rosalie Silverstone (4 September, p 574) confirms with figures the findings and impressions of many who have been involved in this field previously. Surveys get rapidly out of date in this speedily changing scene and it is useful to have impressions confirmed by recent figures—even of a relatively small series. One factor which is mentioned in passing but which I believe is of great importance (because it is difficult to modify) is the lack of geographical flexibility of the group under discussion. The common custom is for a couple to prefer to meet the career demands of the husband, and consequently the woman doctor may either have to move domicile during her training period or is not free to do so in order to take up a particularly suitable post outside her part of the country. I think it is for this reason that posts may sometimes have to be supernumerary because the service element for an established post must be supplied and fails to be so if the occupant of the post changes domicile and no quick successor can be found. A similar situation often obtains when the woman