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## LEADING ARTICLES

Quality not quantity in babies.....	347	Tuberculosis in patients having dialysis.....	349
Cerebral atrophy or hydrocephalus?.....	348	Seasonal cystitis.....	349

## PAPERS AND ORIGINALS

Regular Review: Insulin infusion systems, diabetic control, and microvascular complications	P J WATKINS.....	350
Successful prophylaxis against febrile convulsions with valproic acid or phenobarbitone	SHEILA J WALLACE, J ALDRIDGE SMITH.....	353
Intracellular calcium and pathogenesis and antenatal diagnosis of Duchenne muscular dystrophy	A E H EMERY, D BURT.....	355
Detection of unrecognised nocturnal hypoglycaemia in insulin-treated diabetics	C M ASPLIN, T D R HOCKADAY, R F SMITH, R A MOORE.....	357
Ketotifen in adult asthma	A J DYSON, A D MACKAY.....	360
Blood glucose monitors: a laboratory and patient assessment	DAVID J WEBB, J M LOVESAY, A ELLIS, A H KNIGHT.....	362
Protective effect of inhaled salbutamol powder in children assessed by histamine challenge	C R PULLAN, A J MARTIN....	364
Age distribution of cancer of the cervix uteri	R F MOULD, RAYNA J WILLIAM.....	366
Hypoplastic anaemia associated with legionnaires' disease	V J HAJIROUSSOU, R C JOSHI.....	366
Polyneuritis associated with azathioprine sensitivity reaction	M J G FARTHING, A Y COXON, P C SHEAFF.....	367
Radiological bone changes in T-cell and "common" ALL of childhood	ELIZABETH M SWEET, MICHAEL L N WILLOUGHBY....	367
Immunological findings during successful treatment of BsHAg-associated polyarteritis nodosa by plasmapheresis alone	J M CHALOPIN, G RIFLE, J M TURC, P CORTET, M SEVERAC.....	368

## MEDICAL PRACTICE

Hirsutism and virilisation	JEAN GINSBURG, MICHAEL C WHITE.....	369
Friedrich Wolter (1863-1944): the last anticontagionist	NORMAN HOWARD-JONES.....	372
Procedures in Practice: Ear Syringing	STUART CARNE.....	374
Ethical conflicts in long-term care of the aged: nutritional problems and the patient-care worker relationship	ASTRID NORBERG, BO NORBERG, HANS GIPPERT, GORAN BEXELL.....	377
USSR Letter: From the trial of a Soviet doctor	MICHAEL RYAN.....	379
The First Year of Life: Growth and growth charts	H B VALMAN.....	381
Clinical medical officers in the child health service	FACULTY OF COMMUNITY MEDICINE.....	385
My Student Elective: In the bush at Ochadamu	ROBIN LEETCH.....	387
Adult books	JAMES OWEN DRIFE.....	389
Any Questions?		371, 373, 378, 388
Materia Non Medica—Contribution from PAUL EDWARDS.		390
Words		386
Medicine and Books		391
Medicine and the Media		396
Personal View	D N BARON.....	397

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents.....	398
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OBITUARY .....	409
----------------	-----

## NEWS AND NOTES

Views .....	412
Parliament .....	413
Medical News.....	413
BMA Notices.....	414

## SUPPLEMENT

<b>The Week</b> .....	415
<b>A step nearer to belting up</b> WILLIAM RUSSELL.....	416
<b>Council: "NHS far from a comprehensive service"</b> ..	417
<b>Medical academic staff's anxieties on London study</b> ..	419
<b>Striking the balance</b> RUDOLF KLEIN.....	420
<b>When industrial relations break down</b> NORMAN ELLIS	422
<b>Closing the gap between GPs and hospitals</b> J CRANE..	423

# CORRESPONDENCE

<b>Medicine and the humane society</b> M F Shapiro, MD.....	398	<b>Incidence of malignant melanoma of the skin</b> Susan Evans, MD.....	403	<b>The practice nurse</b> C R Rees, MRCP.....	406
<b>Hypertension and general practice</b> J T Hart, FRCP; A J Silman, MRCP, and F W Murphy, FRCM.....	398	<b>ECT: balancing risks and benefits</b> D A Pond, FRCPsych.....	403	<b>Domiciliary visits by consultants</b> H A Fleming, FRCP.....	406
<b>Labile hypertension</b> H M Bailey.....	399	<b>Services for the mentally handicapped</b> N S Gordon, FRCP.....	403	<b>Unemployed doctors</b> R G Wilkins, MB.....	407
<b>Proximal myopathy during beta-blockade</b> J C Forfar, MRCP, and others; R Goodfellow, PHD.....	399	<b>Disinfection with glutaraldehyde</b> A C Mair, PHD.....	403	<b>Inner city GPs</b> J A Jewell, MB.....	407
<b>Smoking and doctors' mortality</b> Joan M Davies, PHD, and Clair Chilvers, MSc; Lynn T Kozlowski, PHD, and others...	400	<b>Inflammatory bowel disease in relatives of patients with Crohn's disease</b> J F Fielding, FRCP.....	404	<b>Women and general practice</b> Shirley E Nathan, MB.....	407
<b>Carbon monoxide yield of cigarettes</b> K P Ball, FRCP.....	400	<b>Polycythaemia vera and central sleep apnoea</b> J R Stradling, MRCP, and D J Lane, FRCP	404	<b>Sex distribution of distinction awards</b> S Bourne, FRCPsych, and C P L Bruggen, MRCPsych.....	407
<b>Perinatal mortality</b> J A Davis, FRCP.....	401	<b>Day-bed units</b> I A Goulbourne, MB, and others.....	404	<b>A4 records</b> F J Borchardt, MB.....	407
<b>Breast-feeding in Sarawak</b> M C K Chan, FRACP.....	401	<b>Chiropractic and the NHS</b> P E Wells, MCSP.....	404	<b>Disputes procedure</b> S H A Shaw, LLB.....	407
<b>Randomised controlled trials</b> F S A Doran, FRCS.....	401	<b>St Joseph's Hospice</b> D Bielenky, FRCP.....	405	<b>Points</b> Thioridazine and ejaculatory in- competence (E D Freed); Drinking and driving: the leisurely approach (Fiona Weir); Speed limits, economy, and road safety (D D Hilton); Snail-eating mummy? (J G L Cole); Drug names that look or sound alike (D P Markby); Benign recurrent vertigo (L Sonenscher); Culinary terms in medicine (M G Wright); Simplifying the straight-leg-raising test (N R J Hooper); Danbury shakes (W E Hart); Year of the Single-handed Practitioner? (A Muir); Matron since Salmon (J Potter).....	408
<b>Elimination diets in childhood</b> J F Soothill, FRCPATH.....	401	<b>Cimetidine for pruritus related to systemic disorders</b> D L L Roberts, MRCP.....	405	<b>Corrections: Women and general practice</b> (Shepherd); <b>Correspondence list</b> (Kuen- sberg).....	408
<b>Unsolved problems for the '80s</b> M Anne Chamberlain, MRCP; K Norcross, FRCS.....	402	<b>Emergency admission arrangements in hospital with inadequate resources</b> J Andrews, MD.....	405		
<b>Incidence of gallstones and ischaemic heart disease in the West of Scotland</b> A Faichney, FRCSed, and L A Donaldson, FRCSGLAS.....	402	<b>The threshold of urgency</b> C A K Bird, FRCPATH.....	405		
		<b>Patients first</b> R G Notley, FRCS; J J Cockburn, FRCPsych	405		
		<b>Where have all the nurses gone?</b> J W Paulley, FRCP; D J L Tupper, MB....	406		

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.

Correspondents should present their references in the Vancouver style (see examples in these columns). In particular, the names and initials of all authors must be given unless there are more than six, when only the first three should be given, followed by *et al*; and the first and last page numbers of articles and chapters should be included. Titles of papers are not, however, included in the correspondence section.

## Medicine and the humane society

SIR,—In his review of my book *Getting Doctored* Dr Julian Tudor Hart (17 November, p 1285) characterises me as a “radical pessimist.” He agrees with me that the solutions to the problems of medicine are not easy, but he insists that “there are some difficult ones, and it will require tenacity, optimism, and ultimate faith in our science and our profession to work them through.”

In my book I contend that some important problems of medicine, including the authoritarianism of many physicians, alienated social relations among health workers, and the often destructive and exploitative relationships between the providers and recipients of care are, in fact, problems of society as a whole that are manifest in many other institutions and professions. Authoritarianism, inhumanity, and greed are products of the socially mediated consciousness of our citizens and of the socio-economic organisation of society. As such, these problems cannot be willed away, although many individuals do act in exceptional and commendable ways.

For humane, non-exploitative medical practice to be widely realised, I believe that we need to develop a humane and non-exploitative society. In this sense, then, I am a radical; but

am I a pessimist? Dr Hart does not deny the accuracy of my criticisms of medicine, but he feels that there are too many of them. Can there be too many? Horkheimer has said that “the denunciation of everything that mutilates its free development rests on confidence in man.”<sup>1</sup> It is as an optimist that I insist that a decent society be achieved.

Yet I reject neither reforms to the existing health system nor efforts to function humanely within it. In my book I indicate that I prefer a health service such as Britain's to present arrangements in North America, where many people do not have access to regular primary care. A major reason for writing my book was to exhort those who work in medicine to try to avoid some of the unfortunate behaviour patterns into which so many slip.

It is realistic, not pessimistic, to acknowledge that such efforts are only half measures. It is optimistic, not pessimistic, to strive for the best possible medicine in the best possible society. Dr Hart, on the other hand, suggests that we seek solutions to medical problems apart from efforts to change society, and that we have faith in our science and our profession rather than in humanity's ability to transform society and to sustain all that is good in

science and medical practice while so doing. Thus is Dr Hart the true pessimist—the one who is willing to settle for less than what can and should be.

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<sup>1</sup> Horkheimer M. *The eclipse of reason*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1947:187.

## Hypertension and general practice

SIR,—Results of the US Hypertension Detection and Follow-up Program on effects of controlling hypertension in the diastolic range 90-104 mm Hg<sup>1</sup> make this discussion three times more important, urgent, and difficult than appeared when this correspondence began; 70% of all hypertensives are in this range. However achieved, reductions in mortality of 20% for all causes, 46% for stroke, and 47% for myocardial infarction in a five-year study with about 7000 screened and randomised subjects suggests a major effect from properly organised treatment. The concentration of effect in black Americans