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LEADING ARTICLES

Hyposensitisation to house dust mites.....	589	A sequence of pneumonias.....	591
Second-best prostatectomy?.....	590	Give sorrow words.....	592

PAPERS AND ORIGINALS

Value of outpatient follow-up after curative surgery for carcinoma of the large bowel JOHN P S COCHRANE, JOHN T WILLIAMS, RICHARD G FABER, WILLIAM W SLACK.....	593
Home blood glucose concentrations in maturity-onset diabetes R B PAISEY, P BRADSHAW, M HARTOG.....	596
Strongyloidiasis in Allied ex-prisoners of war in south-east Asia D I GROVE.....	598
Improved hypnotic treatment using chlormethiazole and temazepam R S BRIGGS, C M CASTLEDEN, C A KRAFT.....	601
Timing of pre-breakfast insulin injection and postprandial metabolic control in diabetic children A L KINMONTH, J D BAUM.....	604
Comparison of Pasteur and Behringwerke antivenoms in envenoming by the carpet viper (<i>Echis carinatus</i>) D A WARRELL, M J WARRELL, W EDGAR, C R M PRENTICE, JERRELL MATHISON, JOYCE MATHISON.....	607
Acetylsalicylic acid and renal function I L NIELSEN, S RASMUSSEN, T HILDEN.....	610
Interaction of lithium and phenytoin W A G MACCALLUM.....	610
Effect of cimetidine on lower oesophageal sphincter pressure in oesophagitis ROBERT J R GOODALL, JOHN G TEMPLE.....	611
Impaired hearing in the elderly G W CRAMMOND, PATRICIA GABB.....	612
Correction: Successful prophylaxis against febrile convulsions with valproic acid or phenobarbitone WALLACE, ALDRIDGE SMITH.....	612

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Clinicopathological Conference: A case of congestive cardiomyopathy DEMONSTRATION AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS OF LONDON.....	613
The First Year of Life: Vomiting H B VALMAN.....	620
USSR Letter: Morbidity among preschool children in Leningrad MICHAEL RYAN.....	624
Medical Education: Postgraduate education and the doctor DAVID C EVERED, HILARY D WILLIAMS.....	626
Procedures in Practice: Laryngoscopy PHILIP H BEALES, M J AL-KHALED.....	629
Reading for Pleasure: Attraction of the supernatural PHYLLIS MCDONALD.....	632
Any Questions?	628, 633
Materia Non Medica—Contributions from JAMES OWEN DRIFE, D G WILSON, WILLIAM THOMSON.....	619
Medicine and Books.....	634
Medicine and the Media.....	639
Personal View S C FRAZER.....	640

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents.....	641
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NEWS AND NOTES

Views.....	652
Medicolegal—Last ripples of Normansfield.....	653
Parliament—Road Traffic (Seat Belts) Bill.....	653
Medical News—Heart transplants; Lambeth, Southwark, and Lewisham; London Health Planning Consortium...	654
BMA Notices.....	656
Instructions to authors.....	612

OBITUARY.....	657
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SUPPLEMENT

The Week.....	660
Ministerial thoughts on "a beefed-up HAS" WILLIAM RUSSELL.....	661
From the GMS Committee—Computers; Medicover; Medical advisory machinery.....	662
NHS reorganisation: compensation and protection for staff.....	662

CORRESPONDENCE

McIlroy, the media, and the macabre A N Bamji, MRCP, and C Pallis, FRCP.....	641	Ketotifen in adult asthma K Prowse, FRCP.....	646	Medical advisory machinery J L G Kopelowitz, MRCP.....	649
The clinical chemist and the future Mary Warner, MSC.....	642	Resuscitation of the newborn D G Moyes, FFARCS; W W Mushin, FFARCS, and E K Hillard, LIBST.....	646	An effect of inflation W J Trowell, MB.....	649
Prophylaxis against febrile convulsions A Herxheimer, FRCP; J B P Stephenson, FRCP.....	642	Legionnaires' disease and hypoplastic anaemia D O Ho-Yen, MB.....	647	Domiciliary visits by consultants M A Khan, MB.....	649
Weight gain between dialyses in diabetics J Burn, MRCP, and others.....	643	Bone marrow aplasia associated with metronidazole C M White, FRCS, and others.....	647	Inner city GPs A J R Scott-Samuel, MFCM; J N Docherty, MB.....	649
Abortion (Amendment) Bill Madeleine Simms, MSC; S Y Wong; Diane Munday; D Daley, FRCP, and others; P Manson, MB; G C Williams, LMSSA.....	643	Group work with the elderly in a long- stay hospital Mary Marshall, MA, and Sue Newton.....	647	Closing the gap between GPs and hospitals R L Rolls, MB.....	650
Exercise testing in peripheral vascular disease W A P Hamilton, FRCS, and others.....	644	Services for the mentally handicapped Marion C Way, MRCPsych.....	648	A4 records G W Taylor, MRCP.....	650
Dietary fibre and blood pressure P Oster, and others.....	645	Possible cancer hazard associated with 5-methoxypsoralen in suntan preparation P Forlot, PhD.....	648	Medical students and the HJSC D S Amos, and others.....	650
The one-horse race at Moscow T Khosla, PhD.....	645	Emergency admission arrangements in hospital with inadequate resources S S Tachakra, FRCSed.....	648	Good relations or bitterness in hospitals? N V Williams, MB.....	651
Gastroscopic evaluation of anti-inflammatory agents M S Irani, MRCP; J S Kirkham, FRCS; D G Colin-Jones, FRCP, and R A Frost, MRCP; I Caruso, MD, and G Bianchi Porro, MD.....	645	Radiotherapy work-load statistics M B McEvedy, FRCP.....	648	Points Incidence of malignant melanoma of the skin (D B James); Seasonal cystitis (W J D McKinlay); Simplifying the straight-leg-raising test (V M Martin); Eating and ulcers (E Want); False friends indeed (J A Farfor); Not an accident or emergency? (P J M Davis)....	651
Lactation and breast cancer H Ratner, MD.....	646	Are health services important to the people's health? I J T Davies, FRCPed.....	648	Corrections: In defence of the community health council (Youngs); Debendox and the media (Harris and Balfour); Correspondence list (Bowker).....	651
Carbon monoxide yield of cigarettes N J Wald, MRCP, and Sir Richard Doll, FRCP, FRS; P N Lee, MA.....	646	Where have all the nurses gone? Pamela M Jefferies, SRN.....	649		

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.

McIlroy, the media, and the macabre

SIR,—There would be no end to correspondence if the hospitality of your columns remained open indefinitely. New facts and some afterthoughts tempt us, however, to offer a further contribution to the McIlroy saga (14 April, p 973).

May we first stand corrected by Dr Alex Sakula, who pointed out that Raspe was not buried in Killarney and who drew our attention to his most interesting account of the original Baron von Munchausen.¹

For those whose reading is confined to the pages of your journal we confirm that McIlroy is alive and—as usual—not very well. He is not happily settled in an old people's home in Birmingham, as reported when the correspondence was closed (12 May 1979, p 1278) and as echoed in the national press. After entertaining several reporters he upped and left. Then, via Inverness, Glasgow, Belfast, and other places in Ireland, he has made his intermittently hemiparetic way back to England, where he is still, unbelievably, gaining admission to hospitals. In Cornwall he posed as a disabled sailor—collecting, en passant, both sympathy and sweaters. At Queen Mary's Hospital, Roehampton, his arrival generated a detailed circular, from

which it clearly emerges that not all hospital administrators (or, alas, all doctors) read the *BMJ*.

A year ago we reported that McIlroy had been admitted to 68 hospitals. The total now tops 80. Physicians have written to us expressing regret at their omission from the list of those duped. McIlroy's Amended Guide to NHS facilities now includes substantial sections on St Thomas's, the Central Middlesex, the West Middlesex, and the Westminster (in London); St James's, Leeds; the Royal Infirmary, Chester; the General Hospital, Birmingham; the Royal Northern Infirmary, Inverness; Lagan Valley Hospital, Lisburn; Ards Hospital, Newtownards; Tehidy Hospital, Cornwall—and the Falmouth Seaman's Hospital.

Three questions still remain unanswered. Firstly, why are these patients constantly on the move, despite attempts to help them? Great efforts were made over McIlroy in Birmingham, and they seemed (for a short while) to have succeeded—but something set him off again. Secondly, how should we treat such cases? We must concur with a recent comment² that the medical profession seems singularly inept in this field. Has anyone a

constructive suggestion? None has emerged, to our knowledge, in the 28 years since Munchausen's syndrome was first defined.

Our third question is sociological rather than medical. Why did a single report produce such reverberations? Requests for reprints have spanned Europe—from the National Hospital, Queen Square, to the Krakow Institute for Mother and Child (via the Zoological Institute of the University of Hamburg). Serious journals (from staid *Scientific American* to “with it” *World Medicine*) deemed McIlroy's take worthy of comment. The Canadian Broadcasting Company alerted its listeners from Vancouver to Newfoundland. *Time* magazine carried the story even further afield. From the *Shepherd's Bush Gazette and Post* to the *Straits Times* (Singapore) the popular press had a field day. We can only speculate whether the *Thunderer*, if thundering, would have picked up the trail.

Within the profession, was it that there was grudging admiration for a worthy opponent, for the man who kept winning against all odds? Outside it, is there a national—nay international—gratification when the carefully nurtured mystique of medical expertise is itself systematically eroded by a mere con-