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LEADING ARTICLES

Calcium antagonists and the heart.....	89	Aspirin and the stomach.....	91
Occupational physicians and ethics.....	90	The aetiology of mental handicap.....	92

CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

Reduced dopamine-beta-hydroxylase activity in Alzheimer's disease ALAN J CROSS, TIMOTHY J CROW, ELAINE K PERRY, ROBERT H PERRY, GARRY BLESSED, BERNARD E TOMLINSON.....	93
Beta ₂ -microglobulinaemia: a sensitive index of diminishing renal function in diabetics G C VIBERTI, H KEEN, D MACKINTOSH.....	95
Fat content of expressed breast milk: a case for quality control S A SPENCER, D HULL.....	99
Epidemiology of head injury BRYAN JENNETT, ROBERT MACMILLAN.....	101
Salbutamol: tablets, inhalational powder, or nebuliser? K GRIMWOOD, J J JOHNSON-BARRETT, BRENT TAYLOR.....	105
Hospital admissions for whooping cough in the Oxford Region, 1974-9 M J GOLDACRE, R I HARRIS.....	106
Post-transfusion non-A, non-B hepatitis in the Netherlands J N KATCHAKI, T H SIEM, R BROUWER, A M VAN LOON, J TH M VAN DER LOGT.....	107
Serum antibodies to anaerobic coccoid rods in patients with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, and in medical and nursing staff J MAYBERRY, J RHODES, N MATTHEWS, F WENSINCK.....	108
An unusual presentation of opportunistic mucormycosis G HELENGLOSS, J A ELLIOTT, N P LUCIE.....	108
Fatal pseudomembranous colitis despite eradication of Clostridium difficile P C HAWKER, K R HINE, D W BURDON, H THOMPSON, M R B KEIGHLEY.....	109
Sulphasalazine desensitisation C D HOLDSWORTH.....	110
Emergencies in the Home: Urinary tract emergencies J G DAVIES.....	111
Profiles of Practices: From city to coast ANGELA DOUGLAS.....	113
Practice Research: Home visiting in a rural practice R C HUMPHREYS.....	115
Pitfalls in Practice: Any complaints?—II JOHN OLDROYD.....	117

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Perinatal mortality and neonatal survival in Avon: 1976-9 L M M MUTCH, N J BROWN, B D SPEIDEL, P M DUNN.....	119
Problems of the oncology outpatient: role of the liaison health visitor J M TROTTER, R SCOTT, F R MACBETH, J G MCVIE, K C CALMAN.....	122
Clinical pharmacology: Drugs and the elderly LAWRENCE E RAMSAY, GEOFFREY T TUCKER.....	125
ABC of ENT: Deafness in adults HAROLD LUDMAN.....	128
My Student Elective: Medicine among Nilotics in the Sud STELLA J BOWCOCK.....	130
Lesson of the Week: Transient hemiparetic attacks due to unrecognised nocturnal hypoglycaemia J H SILAS, D S GRANT, J L MADDOCKS.....	132
Any Questions?.....	124, 134
Materia Non Medica—Contributions from J M DUNLOP, SELWYN H GOODACRE.....	127
Words.....	131
Reading for Pleasure: Listen to me JOHN H S PETTIT.....	133
Medicine and Books.....	135
Personal View SIR JAMES HOWIE.....	140

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents.....	141
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NEWS AND NOTES

Views.....	154
Epidemiology.....	155
Medicolegal.....	156
Medical New Year Honours.....	157
Medical News.....	158
BMA Notices.....	158

OBITUARY.....	159
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SUPPLEMENT

Inner London general practice—is there a solution? DAVID MORRELL.....	162
From the GMS Committee.....	164
Revised car allowances.....	167
New lodging charges.....	167
Community medicine specialists excluded from management cost exercise.....	168
Working Group on Effective Prescribing.....	168

CORRESPONDENCE

Effect of counselling on the psychiatric morbidity associated with mastectomy K W Pettingale, FRCP, and others	141	Actions of disodium cromoglycate and ketotifen on exercise-induced bronchoconstriction E G M Cameron, MRCP	147	Manpower planning and accurate information M D A Vickers, FFARCS	151
Adjuvant chemotherapy for breast cancer J J Fennelly, FRCP, and B Cantwell, MRCP	142	Is low-level lead pollution dangerous? R R Jones, MRCP	147	The revised consultant contract R P Cumming, FRCS	151
Chemotherapy in pancreatic cancer K W Reynolds, FRCS, and T G Allen-Merish, FRCS; E T O Slater, FRCP	142	Invincible arrogance—and patients suffer J R T Gabriel, FRCP; P M Oppenheimer; E W Poole, FRCP; Anna R Kemp, MRCP; J C McDonald, MB; T A R Dinning, FRCS	147	BMA evidence to the Review Body J M T Willoughby, FRCP	152
Spectacle problems H P Hamblin, MRCS; M Ruben, FRCS; A E Wilson, DOMS; C S Smalley, MRCS; H E Wilson, MFCM; Christine M Schofield, MB	142	Debendox and congenital malformations in Northern Ireland Susan M Barlow, PhD, and F M Sullivan, BSC	148	Prescription charges M Rapoport, MRCP	152
Elemental diets in treatment of acute Crohn's disease A M J Woolfson, MRCP; J A R Smith, FRCS, and C J Stoddard, FRCS; R F A Logan, MRCP, and others; C O'Morain, MRCP, and others	144	Metal allergy: a false alarm? A Lyell, FRCP	149	Direct debit K T H Moore, FRCS	152
Colonoscopic polypectomy in children G S Sokhi, FRCS, and K Hashemi, FRCS	145	Are reflectance meters necessary for home blood glucose monitoring? P D Home, MRCP, and others	149	Mess facilities for hospital doctors C A C Clyne, FRCS	152
Endoscopic assessment of oesophageal disease R Eban, FRCP	145	Haemoglobin A₁ and diabetes G S Gabra, MRCPATH, and R Mitchell, MRCPATH	149	The defence societies and doctors with low incomes Anne L Grüneberg, FFARCS	152
Assessment and management of adults with enuresis D M Essenhigh, FRCS	146	Measuring glycosylated haemoglobin concentrations in a diabetic clinic Barbara J Boucher, FRCP, and S G Welch, PhD	150	A professional discourtesy F M Hull, FRCP	152
What makes man tick B D Lask, MRCPsych	146	Treatment of axillary hyperhidrosis H Yarrow, MRCS	150	Points ABC of blood pressure reduction (A Muir); Impaired glucose tolerance and diabetes (M I Drury); Side effects of methyl-dopa (A J Fogarty); When is it justified to stop the pill? (J A E Primrose); Protection against pertussis by immunisation (R C Chaturvedi); Freezing and thawing of poliovaccines (S C Arya); Blood concentrations following 2% lignocaine gel application in urethra (K Axelsson, and others); Consent for mastectomy (A Green); Computerised prescription analyses (R E Mercer and D S Meldrum)	153
Aspirin sensitivity in asthmatics S Bianco, MD, and others	146	Postnasal sinus K G Harding, MB	150	Correction: ABC of blood pressure reduction (Goldsmith)	153
How long does it take to become fit? R G Richardson, BM; J W Todd, FRCP	146	Mortality, morbidity, and resource allocation R J West, FRCM; W M Patterson, FRCP; P A West, DPHIL	151		

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.

Effect of counselling on the psychiatric morbidity associated with mastectomy

SIR,—The careful evaluation by Dr P Maguire and others (29 November, p 1454) of the effect of counselling by a nurse on the incidence of psychiatric morbidity among breast cancer patients is to be welcomed, not least because evaluation of new services designed to help patients is too rare. As a group concerned for the last 10 years with psychological aspects of cancer in general, we would like to make a number of points, prompted by their work, about the psychological care of patients with cancer.

It is not entirely clear from the article whether the nurse of herself reduced morbidity, or whether the reduction was secondary to early referral to other services. At King's College Hospital we have a specialist nurse for patients with breast cancer, very few of whose patients are referred for care from a psychiatrist; but the very high self-referred rate for her help suggests that services are not obviously available elsewhere to patients. We are

beginning a study to examine the nature of the help the nurse provides in order to clarify whether this is the most effective way of meeting patients' needs.

Breast cancer is favoured among cancers in the publicity which its resulting morbidity has received but it is unlikely to be unique in its distressing psychological consequences. Maxillofacial surgery and laryngectomy, for example, may well result in far greater morbidity but this has received little attention. A number of well-controlled studies of cancer patients during the last 10 years, which we have reviewed,¹ have in any case demonstrated that newly diagnosed patients undergo a natural process of psychological adjustment akin to the process following bereavement. If the nurse counsellor is simply more skilled at recognising those who are casualties of this natural process, surely the most logical course is not to appoint a counsellor for every illness but to foster awareness among those who treat

serious illness of any kind that it may be accompanied by psychiatric illness or disturbed social functioning in a sizable minority of patients. In view of the current trend towards treating cancer and other serious chronic illnesses in specialised centres far from patients' homes, the most obvious starting point for fostering this awareness is not in these centres but among primary care service workers, for they are in the best position to assess patients' difficulties within their home environment.

Although these authors have again demonstrated that psychiatric morbidity among breast cancer patients is high, the inescapable conclusion is that, surprisingly, approximately half of the patients have no psychiatric or sexual morbidity at any stage, even though almost half of them suffer advanced or recurrent disease. To quote from our letter² to you on this subject two years ago, "A 'blanket' service for all such patients is not