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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.

No place like home?

SIR,—Minerva (16 May, p 1634) reports quite correctly that Sir John Dewhurst, past president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, told a recent meeting at the Royal Society of Medicine that he wondered if any woman had ever found labour an emotionally satisfying experience and she asks, "Could he be right?" Being a man, I thought I would ask a number of women of my acquaintance whether they thought it emotionally satisfying, and the reply was "Yes" when the baby was born at home and "No" when the baby was born in hospital.

Since Sir John's remark was made in the context of a reiteration, in the face of as yet uncontroverted evidence to the contrary, that hospital delivery is safer for all women and babies and that safety should be the overriding consideration, the hisses of disagreement noted by Minerva may not have been entirely unearned. Granted that birth in hospital must be safer for babies at risk, and accepting at the moment that while risks are predictable to some extent statistically they are not case by case, it still does not follow that the majority of women ought to be delivered in hospital whether they like it or not, since were hospital to represent a very slightly increased risk for

the healthy majority this would more than counterbalance a greatly increased risk for the minority within a minority in whom things go unpredictably wrong. In any case one cannot help wondering why more research effort is not put into better prediction, and also whether when things go unpredictably wrong at home the outcome would have been any better had the woman concerned been delivered in hospital.

Surely the time has now come for midwives, general practitioners, obstetricians, and neonatal paediatricians perhaps to collaborate in developing new forms of maternity care rather than disputing like boilermakers about whose job it is. One suspects that there may be a very high perinatal mortality in the babies of women who elect to be delivered in nursing homes in the care of obstetricians in private practice, but this has not led to a demand for better audit or for the closure of such institutions—and quite rightly so since the transaction is a private one. It would be sad were the regretted reorganisation of the Health Service, with fusion of the public and private sectors, to lead to yet another unforeseen and unfortunate change in practice—that is, the imposition on the public of the kind of health service that

the DHSS thinks would be good for them (within the financial constraints imposed by our willingness to be taxed in order to pay for it) rather than the provision by the State of what Lord Beveridge saw as a system of insurance that would enable each of us to obtain the medical care that we think we need—the question of standards being left to the conscience of the profession on the one hand and the choice of the public on the other.

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SIR,—Your leading article (23 May, p 1648), like the sentimental song, yearns for a return to a mythical Golden Age.

I clearly remember an episode 25 years ago when I, with my rag and bottle, was called out to assist a colleague who, with his forceps boiled up on the kitchen stove, attempted to overcome an obstructed labour. We failed, an ambulance was called, and the woman was driven 15 miles to hospital. Thankfully she