

BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

SATURDAY 27 JUNE 1981

LEADING ARTICLES

Breast cancer and the pill	2075	Hazards of biliary tract surgery	2077
Non-rheumatic mitral regurgitation	2076	Metastases in the liver	2078
Pulmonary problems of the immunocompromised patient	2077	Hodgkin's disease and viruses	2079

CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

Evidence for defect of complement-mediated phagocytosis by monocytes from patients with rheumatoid arthritis and cutaneous vasculitis N P HURST, G NUKI	2081
Hypercoagulation in glomerulonephritis HATEM H SALEM, JUDITH A WHITWORTH, JERRY KOUTTS, PRISCILLA S KINCAID-SMITH, BARRY G FIRKIN	2083
Atopy does not predispose to RSV bronchiolitis or postbronchiolitic wheezing D G SIMS, P S GARDNER, D WEIGHTMAN, M W TURNER, J F SOOTHILL	2086
Breast cancer and oral contraceptives: findings in Royal College of General Practitioners' study ROYAL COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS	2089
Breast cancer and oral contraceptives: findings in Oxford-Family Planning Association contraceptive study M P VESSEY, KLIM MCPHERSON, RICHARD DOLL	2093
Coincident cytomegalovirus infection and toxoplasmosis in an uncompromised host KARL G NICHOLSON	2095
Management of patients after mastectomy P B CLARK, D L MORRIS	2095
Red cell indices and iron stores in patients undergoing haemodialysis K L LYNN, T R MITCHELL, J SHEPPERD	2096
Gastric ulcer: is endoscopy always necessary? R H SALTER, D K GILL, T G GIRDWOOD, R H MCNEIL, G ATHEY	2097
Hyperoxaluria and recurrent stone formation apparently cured by short courses of pyridoxine A R HARRISON, G P KASIDAS, G A ROSE	2097
Eosinophilia in patients undergoing dialysis JESÚS MONTOLIÚ, JOSÉ LÓPEZ-PEDRET, LOLA ANDREU, LUIS REVERT	2098
Emergencies in the Home: Head, neck, and back injuries KENNETH C EASTON	2099
Law and the General Practitioner: Writing medicolegal reports DAVID M PAUL	2101
Patient Participation: Birchfield Medical Centre Patients' Association	2103
Unemployment in My Practice: Govan, Glasgow JOHN MACKAY	2104
Beyond the Surgery: General practitioner in the factory F J WILKINSON	2105

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Occasional Review: A guide to compensation for asbestos-related diseases M G BRITTON, D T D HUGHES, T J G PHILLIPS	2107
Contemporary Themes: Parents for children ANNE M JEPSON	2112
Statistics in Question: Assessing clinical trials—restricted randomisation SHEILA M GORE	2114
Hospital Topics: Present use of five-day wards R DAVIES, K S CLIFF, W E WATERS	2118
ABC of 1 to 7: Chronic diarrhoea H B VALMAN	2120
Dealing with the Disadvantaged: Illiteracy LENORE GOODINGS	2123
Any Questions?	2111, 2113, 2119, 2124
Medicine and Books	2125
Personal View DAVID WILSON	2129

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents	2130
---------------------------------------	------

OBITUARY	2143
----------------	------

NEWS AND NOTES

Views	2140
Medical News	2141
BMA Notices	2142

SUPPLEMENT

The Week	2146
Letter from Westminster WILLIAM RUSSELL	2147
Review Body: revised NHS salary scales	2148
Statutory sick-pay scheme: medical evidence	2149
Senior Hospital Staffs Conference	2150
Hospital Junior Staff Conference	2154
LMC Conference: GMSC chairman's speech	2158
Community Medicine Conference: selected divisions	2160

CORRESPONDENCE

Medicine and the media

Rt Reverend J S Habgood, PHD; J Drummond, FFCM..... 2130

New uncertainties in prenatal screening for neural tube defect

M Super, FRCPED..... 2131

Trial of folate treatment to prevent recurrence of neural tube defects

K M Laurence, FRCPED, and H Campbell, FRCP..... 2131

Febrile convulsions: long-term treatment

Helen M Lewis, DM..... 2131

Caring for the aged

A Martin, MD, and R J Bailey, MRCP; R A Griffiths, FRCP; K L Gupta, MRCP..... 2132

How dangerous are falls in old people at home?

O H G Wilder-Smith, MB, and T A S Thorp, MB..... 2132

Care of the elderly in general-practitioner hospitals

J R D Brown, MRCP..... 2133

Committing a patient

H Gordon, MFCM..... 2133

Renal function in patients over 40 with homozygous sickle-cell disease

T Sherwood, FRCP; A G Morgan, MD, and G R Serjeant, FRCP..... 2133

Postoperative radiotherapy in breast cancer

M L Friedlander, MRCP, and M H N Tattersall, FRACP..... 2133

Cancer and communication:

Information-giving in an oncology clinic

J A Murray, MRCP, and A Burdett, SRN 2134

Meningococcal chemoprophylaxis

R G Finch, MRCPATH, and J Gilby, BPHARM..... 2134

Prognosis in acute myeloid leukaemia

D Catovsky, MRCPATH..... 2134

Effects of treatment of mild and moderate hypertension

Gillian Greenberg, MB, and others; J A P Trafford, FRCP, and H O'Neal, MRCP..... 2134

Management of angina and hypothyroidism

P B S Fowler, FRCP, and others..... 2135

Management of suspected cardiac infarction by British immediate care doctors

K C Hines, MB; C Wilson, MRCP, and N C Chaturvedi, MRCP..... 2135

Strategy of prevention: lessons from cardiovascular disease

P R J Burch, PHD; J J Segall, MRCP..... 2135

"Caucasian"

B J Freedman, FRCP..... 2136

Dietary fat and coronary artery disease

Sir John McMichael, FRCP, FRS..... 2136

Bladder cancer

O J Traynor, FRCSI, and A E Carter, FRCS 2136

Assisting the police

J K F Mason, FRCPATH..... 2137

Plasmapheresis in the haemolytic-uraemic syndrome in children

P Sweny, MD, and others..... 2137

University budgets and medical education

L W Wale, BSC..... 2137

Medical manpower and the career structure

P K Schütt, MRCP..... 2138

Fewer registrars and more consultants?

P J W Knell, FFARCS..... 2138

Doctors' pay

S P W Nabney, MRCP..... 2138

Industrial action by doctors

C Gray, MB..... 2139

Violation of human rights against Chilean doctors

S R Hirsch, FRCPsych, and others..... 2139

Points Help needed for Galmi Hospital (Sheila A S Harries); Lesson from Canada (S Senior); Inhaled foreign bodies (J C MacLarnon); Comparative risks of rhesus autoimmunisation in two methods of abortion (A H Waters); Doctors' pay (R W Clark); Recurrent herpes simplex and systemic antiviral agents (D G Mayne); Sock it to them (W A Anderson) 2139

Correction: Alcoholism (Webb)..... 2139

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.

Medicine and the media

SIR,—Your interesting article on medicine and the media (13 June, p 1947) provides a useful analysis of some potential sources of conflict. A working group in medical ethics, of which I am chairman, has recently explored part of the same ground, following a number of widely discussed instances in the Northern Region in which local press representatives adopted distasteful methods when investigating medical matters.

Like the participants at your conference, we fully recognise the supreme importance of a free press. Like them we also believe that conflicts of interest can best be resolved by deliberate efforts to establish mutual confidence between the professions, at local as well as national level.

On the whole we have few complaints about feature articles in the press on medical matters. They are usually written by competent and experienced contributors who know how to draw on expert medical opinion. News items, on the other hand, are more likely to be written by unspecialised reporters, and we studied a number of cases in which the reports were harmfully inaccurate, sensational, and painful to those involved. Even when an article is substantially correct, it can be distorted in its presentation by a subeditor's headline.

Newspapers and the broadcasting media are in a competitive business, in which speed is of the essence, and which places a high premium on "human interest" stories.

Doctors, on the other hand, are protective towards their patients and their professional colleagues, and belong to a large organisation which is traditionally less than open in its dealings with the press and the public. News-men are naturally suspicious of such organisations, not least those which have Government backing and wield great power, and may well prefer their own channels of communication to official handouts.

From the point of view of the medical profession, there can be no compromise on the principle that a doctor does not disclose details about his patients, or even their identity, nor does he comment publicly on the work of other doctors. There may, however, be special circumstances, such as heart transplants or the birth of sextuplets, which are known to be of particular public interest because of their comparative rarity, when the consent of those involved can be given for the release of factual information; but doctors recognise an obligation not to be drawn into giving personal opinions regarding treatment or prognosis. They may wish to be present, though, in order to correct possible

errors if their patients are themselves being interviewed by the media.

The direct approach to patients or their relatives by representatives of the media can be a cause of much distress, especially in a time of bereavement. "The patient angle" has a high human interest, and is often quicker and easier to obtain than the official medical story, especially when the doctors concerned cannot be easily identified or contacted, and may in any case be reluctant to comment. Sometimes patients and relatives may themselves welcome publicity as giving a measure of comfort and relief by increasing the public significance of what they are suffering. The value of such publicity must be weighed against the potential harm caused by the dissemination of misleading information.

Conflicts of interest of the kind thus briefly sketched cannot be wholly avoided. It is clear, however, from the experience in some regions, that their worst effects can be mitigated if care is taken to create trust and provide appropriate channels of communication.

A possible way of doing this in a particular region might be to arrange regular meetings, possibly on an annual basis, between members and senior officers of regional health authorities and the editors of newspapers and