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## LEADING ARTICLES

- Avoidable cancer risks with special reference to occupational factors FRANCIS J C ROE ..... 1421  
Old skin J A SAVIN ..... 1422  
Diagnosis and treatment of lactose intolerance ANNE FERGUSON ..... 1423

## CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

- Organochlorine pesticide residues in human fat in the United Kingdom 1976-7  
D C ABBOTT, G B COLLINS, R GOULDING, R A HOODLESS ..... 1425  
Clinical value of serum immunoreactive trypsin concentration W S J RUDELL, C J MITCHELL, I HAMILTON, J P LEEK, J KELLEHER .. 1429  
Tamoxifen versus aminoglutethimide in advanced breast carcinoma: a randomised cross-over trial  
IAN E SMITH, ADRIAN L HARRIS, MICHAEL MORGAN, HUBERT T FORD, JEAN-CLAUDE GAZET, CLIVE L HARMER, HARVEY WHITE,  
COLIN A PARSONS, ANTONIO VILLARDO, GERALDINE WALSH, J ALAN MCKINNA ..... 1432  
Meal frequency and duration of overnight fast: a role in gall-stone formation?  
J P CAPRON, J DELAMARRE, M A HERVE, J L DUPAS, P POULAIN, P DESCOMBES ..... 1435  
Antihistamine treatment: a patient self-assessment method in chronic urticaria M W GREAVES ..... 1435  
Thrombosis after venography in familial antithrombin III deficiency J H WINTER, A FENECH, B BENNETT, A S DOUGLAS ..... 1436  
Osteomalacia in presence of "normal" serum 25-hydroxycholecalciferol concentration KALMAN KAFETZ, H M HODKINSON ..... 1437  
Crohn's disease presenting as recurrent pulmonary oedema M J BRADSHAW, R F HARVEY, C J BURNS-COX ..... 1437  
Importance of symptoms after highly selective vagotomy J R SALAMAN, J HARVEY, H L DUTHIE ..... 1438  
Two's company DONALD THOMSON ..... 1439  
Innovations in Wales: Clwyd: Day hospital care by general practitioners in a cottage/community hospital  
DAVID T JONES, R SAMPANGI RAMAIAH ..... 1441

## MEDICAL PRACTICE

### Autumn Books

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Loneliness of a long distanced reviewer SAM SHUSTER .. 1443                                   | Useful for medical historians JOHN L THORNTON ..... 1451               |
| Reflections on two French fictional doctors<br>MARGARET JACOBI ..... 1444                     | A fifteenth-century "Our Bodies Ourselves"<br>RICHARD SMITH ..... 1452 |
| Theories of madmen assessed E H HARE ..... 1445   | Women healers reinstated UNA MACLEAN ..... 1453                        |
| How the NHS was born LORD TAYLOR OF HARLOW ..... 1446   | Overcoming phobias HENRY R ROLLIN ..... 1454                           |
| Frozen stiff RUTH HOLLAND ..... 1449  | Music as sharing LESLIE BUNT ..... 1455                                |
| Changing role of the neurologist<br>DAVID C THRUSH; WILLIAM PRYSE-PHILLIPS ..... 1450         | Return to the mountains ALEX PATON ..... 1457                          |
| ABC of Alcohol: Asking the right questions A PATON, J B SAUNDERS ..... 1458                   |  |
| Medicine and the Media—Contributions from RICHARD SMITH, TONY SMITH, CHRIS WILLIAM ..... 1460 |  |
| Personal View MARTIN S KNAPP ..... 1461   |  |

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents ..... 1462

OBITUARY ..... 1474

## NEWS AND NOTES

- Views ..... 1476  
Epidemiology—Brucellosis: England and Wales ..... 1477  
Parliament ..... 1477  
Medical News ..... 1478  
BMA Notices ..... 1479

## SUPPLEMENT

- The Week ..... 1480  
Promises are only promises—even for FPCs WILLIAM RUSSELL 1481  
From the GMSC: Pharmacists' decision to stop bulk  
prescribing criticised ..... 1482  
Management arrangements in districts ..... 1484  
Academic staff: redundancy payments ..... 1484  
Medical Practices Committee W B WHOWELL ..... 1485

# CORRESPONDENCE

6

## Paediatricians and the law

K P M Roche, MB; H C McLaren, FRCOG;  
J Lorber, FRCP; R B Zachary, FRCS;  
Margaret S White, MB; M J Blackwell, MB;  
M J Absolon, FRCS; J C Murdoch, MD;  
D S King, MB; R S Jones, FRCP; T H H G  
Koh, MB..... 1462

## Non-smoking wives of heavy smokers have a higher risk of lung cancer

C P Tsokos, Eleanor J Macdonald, MD;  
P N Lee, MA; T Hirayama, MD..... 1464

## Diseases of modern civilisation

J Yudkin, FRCP..... 1466

## Alcohol and alcoholism

C L Brewer, MRCPsych; B D Hore,  
FRCPsych..... 1466

## Renal damage and glue sniffing

G Venkataraman, MD..... 1467

## Ingenious radiologists

D J Allison, FRCR..... 1467

## Metronidazole and antibiotic-associated colitis

R H George, MRCPATH..... 1468

## Stridor

P H Rowlandson, MRCP; M G Addy, MRCP 1468

## Toxicity of interferon

D Fumarola, MD..... 1468

## "Pseudobacteraemia" again

Clare N Simpson, MRCP, and M W  
Casewell, MRCPATH..... 1469

## Antismokers under attack

D Loshak..... 1469

## Doctors and nurses

Julienne Meyer, BSc, and others; Gwen  
Prentice, SRN; Lesley A M Wills, MRCP.. 1469

## Why request reprints?

C G Peters, FFARCS..... 1470

## Ingrowing toenails: an evaluation of two treatments

J C Dagnall, MCHS; P F Cameron, MB.... 1470

## Sex and physical disability

Gillian P Ford, MB..... 1471

## Simple technique for measuring serum or plasma viscosity with disposable apparatus

J D S Kay, MB..... 1471

## Massachusetts General Hospital

A Ferris; H Taegtmeyer, FACP..... 1471

## Treatment of acute mountain sickness

M D O'Brien, FRCP..... 1472

## Seatone in arthritis

R G Gibson, MRCP, and Sheila L M  
Gibson, MD..... 1472

## Wanted: an interest in the elderly

N K Coni, FRCP(c)..... 1472

## Problems of overseas doctors

J C Phillips, MB..... 1472

## Consultants and their future

R D H Ryall, FRCR..... 1473

## Paying general practitioners

S R Iliffe, MRCP..... 1473

## Treating overseas visitors

P H Rack, FRCPsych..... 1473

## South Africa and the World Medical Association

A M Mamujee, FRCSed..... 1473

## Adverse reactions: 100 000 reports

A Goldberg, FRCP..... 1473

*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.*

## Paediatricians and the law

SIR,—Following the controversy surrounding the recent court case, I wish to state clearly that, in common with most Christians, the Guild of Catholic Doctors believes firmly in the following five principles of life:

(1) All innocent people have a fundamental right to life. This right is totally independent of the wishes of others and of the judgment of society.

(2) Each individual in society, and society itself, has a corresponding and most serious obligation to respect that life. It makes no difference whether the innocent person is in full vigour or is handicapped, whether life is just beginning or is drawing to its close. This duty cannot be qualified or set aside just because people are unwilling to recognise it, or find it difficult, or consider that it competes with other, less fundamental rights.

(3) When an individual is clearly dying, or suffering from a fatal ailment, there is usually no moral obligation to undertake special treatment, such as major or dangerous surgery, which will not appreciably improve the situation, or which will only briefly interrupt the onset of death. There can here be a delicate matter of clinical judgment for doctors to assess, and for all interested parties

(not only the doctor) to take into account when a decision is to be made. But even in the case of a dying person any action, or so-called treatment, which deliberately and of set purpose aims at shortening life, or at bringing about its end, is always morally wrong.

(4) Human life can be ended by neglect just as much as by action. And people can be just as morally guilty by not doing normal but essential things for others as by acting positively against them. In other words, allowing people to die as a result of deliberate neglect is just as wrong morally as actively killing them. If people have a basic right to live, then they also have a basic right to all the normal things, including simple nourishment, which are necessary to sustain that life.

(5) This literally basic human right to live is not created or conferred on human beings by the laws of any land. The function of law in regard to life is to acknowledge and protect it, without fear or favour, as fundamental to the very purpose and quality of human society. No human legislation or legal judgment can ever morally justify an action which deliberately aims at destroying the life of an innocent individual. Indeed, in so important a matter society itself should be grateful when public

attention is drawn to the behaviour of either individuals or groups who actively encompass such destruction.

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SIR,—I am worried that your leading article (14 November, p 1280) suggests that medical judgment for or against normal treatment of the damaged neonate should be influenced by the prospect that "For most such babies unwanted by their families the present reality is a miserable lifetime in an NHS institution. . . ." The Chief Rabbi's reported views<sup>1</sup> on the dilemma of the damaged newborn are of special weight with the history of six million European Jews being declared "unwanted" and sent to the gas chambers by the Third Reich. He cautions that "moral culpability extends to any act calculated to induce death, including starvation." Archbishop Hume also declared the Christian belief in the sanctity of life—all life whether imperfect or not.

Has the time come for doctors to take a more modest look at their role in society? Whether in family or specialist practice, given all the