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SATURDAY 12 DECEMBER 1981

LEADING ARTICLES

Last scene of all P H MILLARD	1559
Cutaneous mycobacteriosis N W HORNE	1560
Prolactinoma: a question of rational treatment C R W EDWARDS, C M FEEK	1561
Regular Review: Prostaglandins in human reproduction M P EMBREY	1563

CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

Recovery of bronchial epithelium on stopping smoking JOHN F BERTRAM, ANDREW W ROGERS	1567
Role of mucosal injury in initiating recurrent aphthous stomatitis DAVID WRAY, EDWARD A GRAYKOWSKI, ABNER LOUIS NOTKINS	1569
Percutaneous nephrolithotomy J E A WICKHAM, M J KELLET	1571
Accuracy of early estimation of maturity at a district general hospital MICHAEL J BRINDLE	1572
Plasmapheresis and a placebo procedure in autoerythrocyte sensitisation T J HAMBLIN, S HART, G J MUFTI	1575
Tuning-fork tests in diagnosis of serous otitis media M W YUNG, T M O MORRIS	1576
Lactic acidosis and Fanconi's syndrome due to degraded tetracycline JESÚS MONTOLIU, MONTSERRAT CARRERA, ALEJANDRO DARNELL, LUIS REVERT	1576
Severe peripheral neuropathy complicating legionnaires' disease D J R MORGAN, J GAWLER	1577
Acute polymyopathy during total parenteral nutrition PETER M STEWART, WILLIAM J HENSLEY	1578
Managing Chronic Disease: Managing arthritis RAY MILLION, TERENCE REILLY	U. S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE
Volunteers in General Practice: It does work A ALLIBONE	NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL LIBRARY
1579 1581	
RECEIVED	

MEDICAL PRACTICE

DEC 30 1981

An evaluation of flexible fibroscopic sigmoidoscopy K D VELLACOTT, J D HARDCastle	PROCUREMENT SECTION	1583
Elusive allowances LOREEN MACKENZIE, CAIRNS AITKEN	CURRENT SERIAL REPORTS	1587
Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease as disorders of the isodendritic core M N ROSSOR	1588	
Lesson of the Week: Perforated duodenal ulcer after perioperative steroid treatment J L BEYNON, CATHERINE E JAMES, JANET E WHITEWAY	1591	
Letter from Chicago: Gentle Mackinac GEORGE DUNEA	1592	
ABC of Alcohol: Detection in hospital A PATON, J F POTTER, J B SAUNDERS	1594	
Reading for Pleasure: Opening lines and others ANDREW C SMITH	1596	
Any Questions?	1590, 1597	
Materia Non Medica—Contributions from ROBERT C TAYLOR, H A F DUDLEY	1586	
Medicine and Books	1598	
Personal View SOL BENDER	1603	

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents

1604

OBITUARY

1616

NEWS AND NOTES

Views

1619

Parliament

1620

Medical News

1620

BMA Notices

1621

SUPPLEMENT

The Week	1622
Finance and credibility problems WILLIAM RUSSELL	1623
From the CCHMS: Short Report's manpower proposals sharply criticised	1624
EEC doctors meet in Dublin	1626
Junior doctors' excessive work load	1628
Advisory committee on medical manpower	1628
Corrections: Medical Practices Committee (WHOWELL); Scottish Council	1628

CORRESPONDENCE

Maternal alpha-fetoprotein screening	
Nina Polanska, MRCPath, and others; P W Docherty, MRCOG	1604
Caution on preventing neural-tube defects	
L E Sever, PhD	1605
Haemolytic disease of the newborn due to antibodies other than rhesus anti-D	
H Mickley, MD	1605
Management of gastroenteritis at home	
W A M Cutting, FRCPEd; M E Ellis, MRCP, and others; R B Robinson, MB, and J Williams; J Quarrie, MRCP; P Simpson, MB, and D Macaulay, FRCP	1606
Flexible sigmoidoscopy in outpatients with suspected colonic disease	
M J Goodman, MRCP; Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander R J Leicester, FRCS, and Surgeon Commander R H Hunt, FRCP	1607
Severe metabolic alkalosis	
A S Burns, MB, and T Brown, MB; J K Ikwueke, MRCP; H G Ungley, FRCS; R W Penman, MD	1607
Colovesical fistula diagnosed by unconventional procedure	
J M Dixon, MB, and others	1608
Oesophageal perforation of fibroptic gastroscopy	
D G Colin-Jones, FRCP, and B S Ashby, FRCS	1608
Prostaglandins I₂ and E₁ and red cell deformability in Raynaud's phenomenon and systemic sclerosis	
P M Gaylarde, BSC; Pauline M Dowd, MRCP	1608
The new psychiatry	
D J Rampling, FRACP; I M McIntyre, and others; A A-B Badawy, MRCPath, and M Evans, FRCPsych; R Greene	1609
Poisoning from fumes from polystyrene fire	
R Garnier, MD, and others	1610
Interaction between diuretics and indomethacin	
S G Allan, MRCP, and others	1611
Synergistic action of metolazone and frusemide	
Edwina A Brown, MRCP, and G A MacGregor, MRCP	1611
Opiate toxicity in elderly patients	
J Hossain, MRCP	1611
Growth failure	
P R Betts, MD	1611
Parental smoking at home and height of children	
Sheila Berggreen	1612
Recession and health in Scotland	
P A Draper, FFCM	1612
Charitable organisations in medical research	
A Mackie	1612
Problems of overseas doctors	
D K Lall	1612
Consultants and their future	
J B Ritchie, FRCSED; A S E Bristow, MB	1613
Accountability of clinical medical officers	
Cicely R Haines, MFCM	1613
Civil Service medical officers' pay	
C J Bolt, MB, and W Miller, MB	1614
Medicine and the bomb	
I Tyrrell	1614
Why request reprints?	
G Schiliro, MD; J T Macfarlane, MRCP, and others	1614
Points Paediatricians and the law (M G Revill); The handicapped child (D C Horzman); Late consequences of abortion (Wendy D Savage); High doses of aspirin (A Zinovieff); Laburnum "poisoning" (J M Morritt; H Ippen); ABC of alcohol (Surgeon Captain B V Jones); Leishmaniasis (R S Lambie); Health and the recession (R S Morton); Hides and health hazards (F J Wright); Effects of sodium valproate with special reference to weight (D Chakrabarti)	1615

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.

Maternal alpha-fetoprotein screening

SIR.—The article by Susan J Standing and others (12 September, p 705) describing their disappointment with maternal α -fetoprotein screening illustrates some of the difficulties that can be encountered in running such a programme. However, we consider their tone to be excessively pessimistic. Many of the difficulties which they describe are problems associated with organisation. The need to send amniotic fluid samples to a distant laboratory for analysis was a severe disadvantage.

Currently antenatal patients attending three district general hospitals in the South-west Thames Region are being screened for neural-tube defect. The programme was commenced, after a brief feasibility study, in 1978, for one of the districts (Kingston and Richmond)—adjusted incidence of neural tube defect in 1977 before screening was 2.71 per 1000 births). Enthusiastic attention to the details of organising the screening programme was given by all concerned and good channels of communication were established early on.

Samples of serum and amniotic fluid were assayed in the same laboratory at the regional protein reference unit, Putney, where α -fetoprotein assay of maternal serum and amniotic fluid was already established. Each serum sample was assayed by an in-house radioimmunoassay method (adapted from the method of Nishi and Hirai¹). A

cut-off limit of $2.5 \times$ the median was used with a recommendation that values equal to or in excess of $2.3 \times$ the median should be considered "borderline" and a repeat sample would be assayed if requested. Raised values were checked by re-assaying the same specimen before the report was made. Amniotic fluid α -fetoprotein was estimated by the Laurell "rocket" electroimmunoassay method.

In the first year of screening 2217 patients were screened, and 112 were considered to have raised serum α -fetoprotein concentration. Amniotic fluid specimens were received from 53 patients with raised serum α -fetoprotein levels. Ten of these were found to have raised α -fetoprotein values: two were heavily contaminated with fetal blood as shown by the Kleihauer test; the α -fetoprotein level in four was markedly raised and in one was moderately raised. These latter five pregnancies were terminated after confirmation of abnormality by ultrasound (two cases of anencephaly, two of spina bifida, and one of massive exomphalos); one pregnancy with a grossly elevated amniotic fluid α -fetoprotein value was spontaneously aborted, a very macerated fetus being delivered eight days after amniocentesis. In two patients whose amniotic fluid showed marginally elevated α -fetoprotein levels the estimated gestational ages were revised and the amniotic fluid α -fetoprotein values were then judged to be within their respective normal ranges. These two pregnancies went to term and normal infants were delivered.

One fetus with a closed encephalocele was born at term. The maternal serum α -fetoprotein had been normal and this was confirmed when the stored specimen was re-assayed. The failure to detect a closed neural-tube defect was unavoidable. We were gratified that the incidence of neural-tube defect was shown to have dropped to 0.38 per 1000 births for that year.

In the following two years maternal α -fetoprotein screening was carried out in the other two districts (based on St Peter's Hospital, Chertsey, and Queen Mary's Hospital, Roehampton). These two districts were in a position to benefit from the experience acquired by the previous year's screening and sufficient data had been accumulated to allow adjustment of median values. However, we retained the previous cut-off limits. In 1980 acetylcholinesterase isoenzyme separation² by polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis was added as a further investigation for all amniotic fluid samples and both α -fetoprotein and acetylcholinesterase results were used for the final interpretation. We found that this greatly increased confidence in the laboratory result.

In the three districts during the years 1978-80 6771 pregnant women were screened. A raised α -fetoprotein concentration was found in the first serum sample in 230 of these women, and amniotic fluid was taken because of a raised serum value in 121 cases; there was a raised α -fetoprotein concentration in the amniotic fluid in 18 cases. In five of the pregnancies terminated the fetus had