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LEADING ARTICLES

- What is happening to peptic ulcer? M J S LANGMAN 1063
Is early antenatal attendance so important? JAMES F PEARSON 1064
Genetics of Alzheimer's disease RODNEY HARRIS 1065

CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

- Additive antianginal effect of verapamil in patients receiving propranolol MAYER BASSAN, DANIEL WEILER-RAVELL, ODED SHALEV ... 1067
Atopy predisposing to acute bronchiolitis during an epidemic of respiratory syncytial virus I LAING, F RIEDEL, P L YAP, H SIMPSON 1070
Nuclear magnetic resonance studies of forearm muscle in Duchenne dystrophy
RAYMOND J NEWMAN, PETER J BORE, LAWRENCE CHAN, DAVID G GADIAN, PETER STYLES, DORIS TAYLOR, GEORGE K RADDA 1072
Auscultatory percussion of the head JOHN R GUARINO 1075
Trial of three-day and ten-day courses of amoxycillin in otitis media
D M CHAPUT DE SAINTONGE, D F LEVINE, I TEMPLE SAVAGE, G W S BURGESS, J SHARP, S R MAYHEW, M G SADLER, R MOODY, R GRIFFITHS,
S GRIFFITHS, G MEADOWS 1078
Survival and desferrioxamine in thalassaemia major B MODELL, E A LETSKY, D M FLYNN, R PETO, D J WEATHERALL 1081
Importance of short-term changes in glycosylated haemoglobin
F S SHENOUDA, C S COCKRAM, M D BARON, A TSATSOLIS, LIN WEN HAN, P H SØNKSEN 1084
Severe hyponatraemia and cardiac failure successfully treated with captopril A J MONTGOMERY, A N SHEPHERD, D EMSLIE-SMITH .. 1085
Smoking among patients with malignant hypertension JAAKKO TUOMILEHTO, JYRKI ELO, AULIKKI NISSINEN 1086
Rubella prevention: two methods compared A HUTCHINSON, J THOMPSON 1087
A case against deputising services PAUL A CREIGHTON 1090
Practising Prevention: Opportunities for prevention: the consultation S A SMAIL 1092
The GP and the Specialist: Dermatology LIONEL FRY 1093

MEDICAL PRACTICE

- A plain man's guide to the management of migraine J N BLAU 1095
Combined short-stay/day surgery/investigation unit in a district general hospital R SAMPANGI RAMAIAH, DAVID T JONES, ABANI K PAL 1098
Pulmonary embolism in surgical patients: 1959-79 C V RUCKLEY, C THURSTON 1100
ABC of 1 to 7: Services for children: social services H B VALMAN 1103
Reading for Pleasure: History opened my eyes DOUGLAS GAIRDNER 1105
Any Questions? 1097, 1099, 1102
Medicine and Books 1107
Medicine and the Media—Contributions from JOHN HAMPTON, GO 1110
Personal View MICHAEL HAWKINS 1111

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents 111

OBITUARY 1128

NEWS AND NOTES

- Views 1124
Epidemiology—Paratyphoid in tourists 1125
Medicolegal—No right to sue for "wrongful life" 1125
Medical News 1126
BMA Notices—Medical advisers in the pharmaceutical
industry group 1127

- describing WILLIAM RUSSELL 1131
doctors J L KEARNS 1132
State and private medicine 1134
Pension increases November 1982 1134
NHS reorganisation 1135
GMC's Professional Conduct Committee 1136
Increase in staff employed by NHS 1136
Civil Service medical officers 1136
Medical academic staff: redundancy compensation 1136

CORRESPONDENCE

Unemployment and health in the United States J J Frey, MD 1112	Primary biliary cirrhosis P A Berg, MD, and others 1116	Women in general practice Mary L Evans, MB 1119
Effect of rubella vaccination programme in schools on rubella immunity in a general practice population R E Simmons, MRCP; S J Steele, FRCOG, and Francoise Shenfield, MRCS 1113	The perils of abstinence? A C P Sims, FRCPSYCH 1116	The legal threat to medicine P Lambah, MRCS 1120
Myocardial infarction in Carlisle in 1983 W P Honeyman, MB 1113	Dog bites man R Philipp, MFOM, and M A H Webb, MFOM 1116	Sinus arrest during treatment with amiodarone B McGovern, MB, and others 1120
Pertussis immunisation D Morris, FRCP 1114	Unblocking coronary arteries Muriel E Purkiss, MB 1117	Captopril in renovascular hypertension: long-term use in predicting surgical outcome L E Ramsay, MRCP 1120
Atom bombs and genetic damage J H Edwards, FRCP, FRS 1114	A stressful life K S Jones, FRCPSYCH 1117	Psychological and social evaluation in cases of deliberate self-poisoning seen in an accident department E D Myers, MRCPSYCH; R Gardner, FRCPSYCH, and R Hanka, PHD 1121
Acetazolamide and symptomatic metabolic acidosis in mild renal failure W Reid, MB, and A D B Harrower, MRCP 1114	Bronchial hyperreactivity to distilled water and saline S L Spector, MD; Sandra D Anderson, PHD 1117	The starving of the medical schools D N Slater, MRCPATH 1121
Ovulation side and occurrence of mittelschmerz in spontaneous and induced ovarian cycles J J Slome, MB 1114	Renal function after prolonged consumption of aspirin H C Barry, MRACP, and P A Dieppe, MRCP 1117	Vasodilators in heart failure J Iqbal, MRCP; L B Tan, MB 1121
Circadian variation in disease activity in rheumatoid arthritis J C Robertson, MRCP, and others 1114	Discrepancy in results from three guaiacum resin tests H Adlercreutz, MD, and others 1118	Mozart older than we thought A Lock 1122
Children's accidents J A S Dickson, FRCS, and others 1115	Methadone produces prolonged postoperative analgesia J M Cundy, FFARCS 1118	Reorganisation problems in Powys K C Harvey, MRCP 1122
Oestrogen receptors and survival in early breast cancer T Cooke, FRCS 1115	Cetrimide allergy presenting as suspected non-accidental injury J K Inman, MB 1118	GMC Working Party A Allibone, MRCP; A K Baksi, MRCP 1122
Conversion to U100 insulin M R Kiln, MB 1115	Renal failure—dilemmas and developments A R Luksza, MRCP 1118	Membership of the Transkei Medical Association of the World Medical Association A B L Pupuma, MB 1122
Population growth and contraception in Africa A De Clercq, MD, and A Meheus, MD 1116	Will breast self-examination save lives? Lorraine Taylor, SRN, and A Kalache, MD 1119	Job descriptions for DMOs P K Hopper, MRCPATH 1123
Treating senile orofacial dyskinesia A C Gibson, FRCPSYCH; J S Watkins, MRCP, and P J Sleight, MRCP 1116	How effective are our child health clinics? W A Hendrickse, MRCP 1119	Overseas visitors and hospital treatment T R M Bristow, FFARCS 1123
	Do patients cash prescriptions? J E Lunn, MFOM 1119	Alcoholism in the Third World F G Joseph, MD 1123

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 should be typed with double spacing between lines and 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.

Unemployment and health in the United States

SIR,—The series "Unemployment in my practice" was most useful in that it presented insights into the pervasive negative effects of unemployment on the spirits of patients in a wide range of communities and on the spirits of those communities themselves. The personal nature of the reporting contrasted with government statistics which speak of millions unemployed. In my practice, I see individual suffering; millions are numbing but invisible.

I was struck by the piece by Dr John Wilson (19 September, p 770) in which he wrote of the additional burden unemployment places on the work load of the GP. A recent article from the *American Medical Association News* (5 March 1982) sheds light on the effect of unemployment on the physicians and patients in the US.

Michigan, particularly the Detroit area, has suffered the most during the severe recession in the US with unemployment figures of over 11% for the State and over 14% in Detroit. Unemployed workers no longer have health insurance coverage from union and factory plans. To purchase family coverage without benefit of group packages, it is more than twice as expensive. It is estimated that two-thirds of

unemployed workers have no insurance. The AMA article also related reports of a 40% decrease in patient volume and 60% decrease in personal incomes of physicians engaged in primary care in areas most affected by redundancies. While surgeons are less heavily affected, presumably since people continue to have surgical emergencies regardless of their work status, one wonders what the long-term effects will be of forcing millions of people to put off or avoid visits to primary care physicians in order to pay mortgages, utility, and food bills.

The forces of unemployment and poverty directly affect the functioning of patient and physician in the medical marketplace of American private practice. In the Detroit area, physicians are setting up referral networks to provide free or low-cost care for patients. That may assist the one million unemployed workers and their families in Michigan, but similar smaller scale dilemmas exist throughout the US. In addition, public clinics and Medicaid payments are being singled out for cuts by the Reagan Administration, thus decreasing availability of care for those who

already use the public sector. One can imagine the effect of present unemployment levels in Britain if there were no NHS and patients were forced to purchase medical care in a fee-for-service system.

The inadequacies of the US system of medical care are most glaring when health care suddenly becomes a luxury. Physicians who care for the largest number of working class unemployed patients are forced either to provide free care or to find some way of collecting what money is available from patients, or must consider moving to more affluent areas with lower unemployment rates. Prolonged unemployment, therefore, breeds a sort of economic "inverse care law" with the accessibility, quality, and available funds to purchase medical care being inversely proportional to the needs of the population. In Britain hard times produce additional work for physicians caring for patients suffering from the physical and emotional consequences of poverty; in the US hard times produce doctors with nearly empty waiting rooms.

While the high unemployment levels in Britain have taxed the NHS, particularly