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LEADING ARTICLES

Benoxaprofen	459	Immune guided missiles T J HAMBLIN	461
Transsexualism observed HENRY R ROLLIN	461	Neuroleptics and abnormal movements M H LADER ..	463
		Pregnancy in the Marfan syndrome PETER BEIGHTON ..	464

CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

Reduction in size of prolactin-secreting tumours in men treated with pergolide PAT KENDALL-TAYLOR, K HALL, D G JOHNSTON, R W G PRESCOTT	465
Septicaemia due to <i>Yersinia enterocolitica</i> after oral overdoses of iron KJETIL MELBY, SOFIE SLØRDAL, TORE JARL GUTTEBERG, SVEIN ARNE NORDBØ	467
Sphygmomanometers in hospital and family practice: problems and recommendations M J BURKE, HELEN M TOWERS, K O'MALLEY, D J FITZGERALD, E T O'BRIEN	469
Drug resistance among infantile enteropathogenic <i>Escherichia coli</i> strains isolated in the United Kingdom R J GROSS, LINDA R WARD, E J THRELFALL, HILARY KING, B ROWE	472
Reuse of haemodialysis equipment: convenience and cost effectiveness H K BANESTER, R D DRISCOLL, R N GREENWOOD, W R CATTELL	473
Regression of carcinoid tumour with cyproheptadine ADRIAN L HARRIS, IAN E SMITH	475
<i>Clostridium difficile</i> in toxic megacolon complicating acute inflammatory bowel disease ROBIN P BOLTON, ALAN E READ	475
Ranitidine in acute upper gastrointestinal haemorrhage JOHN DAWSON, ROY COCKEL	476
Paralytic ileus and urinary retention due to hypothyroidism A W NATHAN, C W H HAVARD	477
Motor spastic paraparesis and unilateral infranuclear facial palsy complicating tetanus M K JAIN, S K KHANJO, N K SHARMA	477
Unusual strychnine poisoning and its treatment: report of eight cases W G O'CALLAGHAN, N JOYCE, H E COUNIHAN, M WARD, P LAVELLE, E O'BRIEN	478
Should general practitioners be planners? M A VARNAM	479
Research in General Practice: How to do collaborative research W O WILLIAMS	480

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Allergy screening using a microcomputer C F A PANTIN, T G MERRETT	483
Availability of computed tomography for the management of head injuries in England and Wales IAN A BAKER	487
Who asks for vasectomy reversal and why? GERALDINE HOWARD	490
ABC of Diabetes: Diabetic neuropathy—I PETER J WATKINS	493
USSR Letter: Changing pattern of Russian hospitals MICHAEL RYAN	496
Reading for Pleasure: World(s) enough and Time RAYMOND E GOODMAN	498
Any Questions?	489
Materia Non Medica—Contributions from P J TOGHILL, CHARLES G MACKWORTH YOUNG	499
Medicine and Books	500
Medicine and the Media—Contributions from COLIN CURRIE, JAMES OWEN DRIFE, HUGH BAIRD	504
Personal View MARTIN BELLMAN	505

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents

506

OBITUARY

516

NEWS AND NOTES

Views	518
Parliament	519
Medical News—Suspension of Benoxaprofen (Opren)	519
BMA Notices	520

SUPPLEMENT

The Week	521
Careers of doctors qualifying in Britain in 1974: a report on their employment status in 1979 JAMES PARKHOUSE, M G CAMPBELL, H F PARKHOUSE	522

CORRESPONDENCE

Accuracy of hospital activity analysis data	506
M S Butts, PhD, and D R R Williams, MB	
Cigarette consumption and biochemical measures of smoke intake	507
M A H Russell, FRCPsych; C J Vesey, MSC, and others	
Why smoke fewer cigarettes?	508
G Galea, MRCS, and R J L Davidson, FRCPATH	
The GP and the specialist: gastroenterology	508
J Baillie, MRCP	
ABC of Diabetes	508
B F Clarke, FRCPED, and L J P Duncan, FRCPED	
ABC of Diabetes: diabetic emergencies	509
O M P Jolobe, MRCP	
Prevalence of insulin-treated diabetes mellitus	509
A J Hedley, MD, and others	
Op-Site and the DHSS	509
L F Tinckler, FRCS; B Robertson, MRCS	
What shall we do with the drunken citizen?	509
B D Hore, FRCP	
Simple and effective method of removing starch powder from surgical gloves	510
G L Ridgway, MRCPATH, and M E M Thomas, FRCPATH	
Unholy wedlock?	510
J R D Brown, MRCGP	
Bladder fever: rare complication of the "safe period" method of contraception	510
G I M Swyer, FRCOG	

Practising prevention: pregnancy	510
A F J Atkins, MRCOG, and R W Beard, FRCOG	
Idiopathic oedema	511
N B Eastwood, FRCP	
Anxiety caused by a short-life hypnotic	511
I Oswald, FRCPsych	
Cardiac arrhythmias in the elderly	511
L Wollner, FRCP, and S T McCarthy, MRCP	
Haemofiltration for profound dialysis-induced hypotension: removal of sodium and water without blood-pressure change	511
R N Greenwood, MRCP, and W R Cattell, FRCP	
Electronic bed-wetting alarm and toilet trainer	512
Evelyn M Fleming, MB	
Severe hypoglycaemia due to combined use of parenteral nutrition and renal dialysis	512
R Ahmad, MB, and H J Goldsmith, FRCP; J D B Miller, FRCS	
The health visitor and prevention	512
R P Snaith, FRCPsych	
Response of patients to upper gastrointestinal endoscopy: effect of inherent personality traits and premedication with diazepam	512
R H Jones, MRCP	
Elderly patients in a general surgical unit: do they block beds?	513
J P Wattis, MRCPsych	
Headache and tumours in children	513
I R Sanderson, MB	
Oestrogen receptors and survival in early breast cancer	513
T F Sandeman, FRCP; R J C Steele, MR	
Computers in general practice	513
I G Cox, FRCP	
The Faculty of Community Medicine, nuclear war, and the "Guardian"	513
E A Smith, PFCM	
Women in medicine	514
P O Leggat, FRCP	
Training and singlehanded consultant surgeons	514
W R Smith, MRCGP	
Medical manpower	514
D Negus, FRCS	
Anaesthesia and manpower proposals	514
Aileen K Adams, FFARCS	
Points	514
Inappropriate secretion of anti-diuretic hormone treated with frusemide (D Parker); Treatment of acute abscesses in the casualty department (M H Simms and J Alexander-Williams); Whooping cough (T A Bell); Lumbar spinal stenosis (W F Merriam and others); Perinatal referral: a time for decisions (L M Mayer-Jones); Where am I? (A T Irvine); Chiropody and podiatry (M G Payntor); Phaeochromocytoma presenting as pyrexia of undetermined origin: diagnosis using gallium-67 (G J Kleiner and Wilma M Greston); Water intoxication and oxytocin (S J Bentley)	

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, who should include their degrees. We cannot acknowledge their receipt unless a stamped addressed envelope or an international reply coupon is enclosed.

Accuracy of hospital activity analysis data

SIR.—Mr J L Rees (19 June, p 1856) raises a number of important issues concerning the accuracy and use of hospital activity analysis data. Two different exercises are reported. In the first, data for cases of proximal femoral fracture were used to calculate age- and sex-specific incidence rates for nine geographic areas in the Northern Region. The resultant rates are not quoted, even though the results are likely to be of considerable interest to those concerned with services for the elderly. Reference is then made to "multivariate procedures" which were used to detect "statistically significant between-area differences in incidence rates." There is, however, no mention of the models or assumptions underlying the "multivariate procedures" nor even any indication of the results of the analysis other than that they were "statistically significant."

The second exercise was concerned with the accuracy of the hospital activity analysis coding of these fractures. A sample of data was drawn from operation records of two hospitals and from the admission books of three other hospitals. No indication is given of the size of sample or the basis on which it was chosen. In the case of operations records, it was assumed that the proportion of cases not operated on as recorded in a sample of hospital activity analysis data could be used to produce an estimate of the total number of cases of proximal femoral fracture. The sample of data thus constructed for the five hospitals was

then compared with the number of cases of proximal femoral fracture recorded on the hospital activity analysis. In the case of three of the five hospitals the comparison was judged to be statistically significantly different at the 1% level. No mention was made of the statistical criteria adopted.

The inference made from these comparisons was that hospital activity analysis recording and coding procedures were at fault. An alternative and, in our opinion, equally likely interpretation (given the lack of detail in the paper) is that significant errors are inherent in the set of assumptions employed to produce the "estimated true number" of cases against which the hospital activity analysis data were compared.

We are not suggesting that the accuracy of hospital activity analysis data is beyond question, but before such important conclusions were made about this question, a more complete account of the methods of study should have been provided. Ideally an independent and valid source of data which is not subject to questionable uncertainties and assumptions should have been used as a comparison for hospital activity analysis coding.

Important questions are also raised by the article which follows by Mr Peter D Whates and others (p 1857). These authors considered the accuracy of hospital activity analysis coding of operations for proctocolectomy, ileostomy, and ileorectal anastomosis performed over 10 years in hospitals of the North Western Regional Health Authority and for splenectomy performed by members of a professorial unit at one hospital in the same region.

The results presented in their paper suggested

a failure by "non-medically qualified hospital activity staff" to enter, in a substantial number of cases, the correct Office of Population Censuses and Surveys operation code for the procedure as recorded in the operation notes. This applied to both the bowel surgery and the splenectomy with or without associated lymph node "mapping" procedures. These results led the authors "seriously to doubt the statistical validity of any random sampling exercise undertaken on the basis of hospital activity analysis operation codings" and to advocate "properly kept internal records" (presumably in each surgical department) as a more reliable source of information for research and planning.

While sharing with the authors their concern that the error rate apparently revealed for these operations in the North Western Regional Health Authority is so high, we would question the validity of extrapolating from their rather limited study to the validity of hospital activity analysis data on all operations conducted in the other 13 regions of the NHS. Their article has, however, prompted us to conduct a small study of hospital activity analysis coding of these same operations in the East Anglian Region, and we wish to present the initial results of this study which we hope to develop as a regular method of monitoring several aspects of the validity of clinical coding in the region.

The theatre records of one major hospital in East Anglia were searched for all cases of colonic or rectal resection or both performed by one general surgeon in 1980 and for cases of splenectomy performed by all general surgeons operating at that same hospital in the same year. This