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## LEADING ARTICLES

Who is taking their tablets? RICHARD M PEARSON . . . . .	757	Image and reality: drugs for the future TONY SMITH . . .	761
"Type B" cardiology J R HAMPTON . . . . .	759	Regular Review: Severe mental handicap: pathogenesis, treatment, and prevention MD'ACRAWFORD	762
Serological tests for syphilis J D ORIEL . . . . .	759		

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

Is exercise good for high blood pressure? R G WILCOX, T BENNETT, A M BROWN, I A MACDONALD . . . . .	767
Reversal of aplastic anaemia secondary to systemic lupus erythematosus by high-dose intravenous cyclophosphamide M J WALPORT, W N HUBBARD, G R V HUGHES . . . . .	769
Mortality from asthma: a new epidemic in New Zealand RODNEY T JACKSON, ROBERT BEAGLEHOLE, HAROLD H REA, DAVID C SUTHERLAND . . .	771
Nuclear magnetic resonance imaging of the brain in children M I LEVENE, A WHITELAW, V DUBOWITZ, G M BYDDER, R E STEINER, C P RANDELL, I R YOUNG . . . . .	774
Can a cat smother and kill a baby? MICHAEL S KEARNEY, LAURITZ B DAHL, HELGE STALSBERG . . . . .	777
Glaucoma and driving J M MACKEAN, A R ELKINGTON . . . . .	777
Ulnar nerve palsy and walking frames R I REID, M A ASHBY . . . . .	778
Metabolic consequences of salbutamol poisoning reversed by propranolol J M C CONNELL, G M COOK, G T MCINNES . . . . .	779
Aminophylline toxicity in the elderly IAIN DRUMMOND . . . . .	779
Steatorrhoea after tetracycline T H MITCHELL, T C B STAMP, M V JENKINS . . . . .	780
Mandatory Training: The case in favour A G CAMERON . . . . .	781
Problems in doing operational research M G F CROWE . . . . .	783

## MEDICAL PRACTICE

I am an alcoholic GARETH LLOYD . . . . .	785
ABC of Diabetes: Organisation of diabetic care P A THORN, PETER J WATKINS . . . . .	787
Cardiology in a district hospital MICHAEL JOY, ISABEL HUGGETT . . . . .	790
My Student Elective: Malaria in New Guinea MICHAEL KURER . . . . .	793
Lesson of the Week: Nebulised salbutamol and angina E NEVILLE, P A CORRIS, JENE VIVIAN, S NARIMAN, G J GIBSON . . . . .	796
Any Questions? . . . . .	786, 792
Medicine and Books . . . . .	798
Medicine and the Media—Contributions from RICHARD SMITH, SUE BURKHART . . . . .	804
Personal View P G E KENNEDY . . . . .	805

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents . . . . .	806
-------------------------------------------	-----

OBITUARY . . . . .	819
--------------------	-----

## NEWS AND NOTES

Views . . . . .	821
Medical News . . . . .	822
BMA Notices . . . . .	823

## SUPPLEMENT

In search of an optimal health care system S G M GOLDSTEIN . . .	824
From the Council: Industrial dispute debated . . . . .	826
BMA POWAR elections . . . . .	827
Associate Members Group . . . . .	828

# CORRESPONDENCE

## Maternal nutrition, breast-feeding, and contraception

D B Jelliffe, FRCP, and E F Patrice Jelliffe, MPH ..... 806

**Sulpiride improves inadequate lactation**  
R M O'Leary, BA; D P Davies, FRCP ..... 807

**Postmenopausal osteoporosis**  
A M Smith, FRCOG; Jean Coope, MRCP; G S Rai, MRCP ..... 807

**Hypertension: comparison of drug and non-drug treatments**  
J Sommers, and D B Jeffrey, PHD ..... 808

**Do alcoholics recover?**  
M M Glatt, FRCPsych ..... 808

**Benoxaprofen**  
A Blum, MD; S M Wolfe, MD, and Eve Bargmann, MD ..... 809

**Prescription-event monitoring**  
W H W Inman, FRCP ..... 809

**Chest radiography as a marker of alcoholism**  
A D Redmond, FRCSed ..... 810

**Diabetic complications: retinopathy**  
C Townsend, FRCS ..... 810

**ABC of Diabetes: diabetic emergencies**  
P Baker, MB; O M P Jolobe, MRCP ..... 810

**The arms race and health care**  
C de B White, MRCPsych ..... 810

**Cigarette consumption and biochemical measures of smoke intake**  
R Peto, MSC ..... 811

**Nicotine chewing-gum**  
R F Hyde, MRCP; R Paxton, PHD; T E A Carr, FRCP; N B Taylor, BA ..... 811

## Warfarin and albumin

A L Tárnoky, FRCPATH ..... 812

**Methaemoglobinaemia due to monolinuron—not paraquat**  
A T Proudfoot, FRCPed ..... 812

**Interaction between flurbiprofen and coumarins**  
B H Ch Stricker, MD, and J L Delhez, MD ..... 812

**Chaplain to casualty**  
Valerie Hartley-Brewer, MD; Reverend R Lapwood ..... 813

**Careers of doctors qualifying in Britain in 1974**  
J A Gilmore, MB; J Parkhouse, FFARCS ..... 813

**Electric convulsion therapy apparatus**  
J S Pippard, FRCPsych ..... 813

**Asbestos and the media**  
J Cutler ..... 814

**Unusual complication of perforated appendix**  
R M Watkins, FRCS ..... 814

**Bromocriptine in management of large pituitary tumours**  
J A H Wass, MRCP, and others ..... 814

**Postoperative infection in shunts for hydrocephalus**  
J O N Lawson, FRCS; B P Gardner, FRCS ..... 815

**After-exercise thermography**  
H P Henderson, FRCS ..... 815

**Laser photoradiation for lung cancer**  
M R Hetzel, MRCP, and others ..... 815

**Psychological impairment and low-dose benzodiazepine treatment**  
H Petursson, MRCPsych, and M H Lader, FRCPsych ..... 815

## Healthier children

C R Haines, MFCM ..... 816

**Claims about compression treatment for venous disease**  
D J Tibbs, FRCP ..... 816

**Paediatric surveillance**  
P D Hooper, FRCP, and G H Curtis Jenkins, MB ..... 816

**GMC finance**  
M R Draper, BA ..... 816

**Medical communication: the old and the new**  
M O'Donnell, MB ..... 816

**Points Women in medicine (Susan E Lessels; T B Boulton); University cuts (P O Yates); Persistent irritation of the eyelid margins (H Ippen); Let he who is without sin ... (R I Keen); Diabetic neuropathy (J L Verbov); Diabetic complications: retinopathy (B W Fleck); Shortening waiting lists in orthopaedic surgery outpatient clinics (J A Lourie); Maternal anti-D concentrations and outcome in rhesus haemolytic disease of the newborn (J W Crawford) ..... 817**

**The late Sir John Charnley (D L Griffiths); Immune response of infants in tropics to injectable polio vaccine (S C Arya); Part-time training (Jean E Lawrie); Changes in home visiting and night and weekend cover: the patient's view (W G Westall); Whom does BUPA care for? (S L Kaye); Fees for cervical smears (Patricia Martin); Reuse of haemodialysis equipment (P Hautekiet) .... 818**

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*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 nutrition, breast-feeding, and contraception

SIR,—The recent leading article by Professor John Dobbing (12 June, p 1725) seems to us to confuse what is biologically obvious. The situation is really simple. All mammals have evolved appropriate spacing mechanisms for their offspring depending on the species' mode of life and the needs and maturity of their young; and these mechanisms are capable of responding to severe local food shortages. In most wild primates lactation anoestrus is mainly responsible.<sup>1</sup> Similarly in humans lactation amenorrhoea is the ancestral endocrinological means of child spacing.<sup>2,3</sup> However, and this is the point, effectiveness varies with the pattern of breast feeding, or more correctly the *cumulative sucking stimulus* as measured by the length of nursing, the vigour of the baby, and, probably most importantly, the number of times the infant takes the breast<sup>4</sup> minus deviation of sucking stimulus (complementary bottle feeds, paci-

fiers) or blunting of appetite (early introduction of semi-solids).

For 99% of human existence as gatherer-hunters the dyadic closeness of mother and young child was accompanied by extremely frequent sucking throughout the 24 hours. Few such societies exist today, but these show highly effective and prolonged child-spacing. The !Kung are classical, with mean birth intervals of about four years.<sup>5</sup> With the development of agriculture and village settlements (and the availability of cereals and animal milk)<sup>4</sup> and of early urbanisation, and especially with current technological urbanisation, the amount of sucking, the length of lactation amenorrhoea, and hence the effectiveness of biological child spacing declined, so that its existence was denied by modern medicine until very recent years.

Maternal malnutrition plays only a very small part in this postpartum amenorrhoea.<sup>6-8</sup>

In severe food shortages, however, as in famines, menstruation ceases in all females as a form of nutritional and biological protection for women and for the community.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, well nourished women in the UK and USA who breast-feed frequently without supplements do not menstruate for well over two years after delivery.<sup>10,11</sup>

General public health guidelines accepted by current international consensus are straightforward for many developing country circumstances<sup>3,12</sup> and are similar nutritionally to those suggested in WHO publications 27 years ago<sup>13</sup>: (1) Ensure as good a diet as possible for mothers in pregnancy (lactation stores of subcutaneous fat, fetal stores, avoidance of low-birth-weight neonates) and in lactation—often feasible, but economically and culturally difficult because of restrictions on readily available foods. (2) Breast-feed alone on an unrestricted 24-hour schedule for at least four to