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# BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

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PROCUREMENT SECTION  
CURRENT SERIAL RECORDS

SATURDAY 27 NOVEMBER 1982

## LEADING ARTICLES

Pop diets for weight reduction	A STEWART TRUSWELL .....	1519	Hazards of lumbar puncture	J M S PEARCE .....	1521
Antacids for duodenal ulcer?	M J S LANGMAN .....	1520	Unnecessary examinations?	.....	1522

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

### Abnormal cardiac enzyme responses after strenuous exercise: alternative diagnostic aids

E M OHMAN, K K TEO, A H JOHNSON, P B COLLINS, D G DOWSETT, J T ENNIS, J H HORGAN .....	1523	
Correction: Comparison of whole-blood eosinophil counts	LUKSZA, JONES .....	1526

### Congenital hip dislocation: an increasing and still uncontrolled disability?

JOHN C CATFORD, GEORGE C BENNET, JOHN A WILKINSON .....	1527
---	------

### Admission after mild head injury: benefits and costs

A D MENDELOW, D A CAMPBELL, R R JEFFREY, J D MILLER, C HESSETT, J BRYDEN, B JENNITT .....	1530
---	------

### Irritable bowel syndrome—a safe diagnosis?

K M HOLMES, R H SALTER .....	1533
------------------------------	------

### Bromocriptine-associated hyponatraemia in cirrhosis

ALEX W MARSHALL, ANDREW W JAKOBOWITS, MARSHA Y MORGAN .....	1534
---	------

### Normal pregnancy in renal transplant recipient with history of eclampsia and intrauterine death

P F WILLIAMS, M JOHNSTONE .....	1535
---------------------------------	------

### Exercise testing in assessment of hypertension

B LEIBEL, I KOBIN, D BEN-ISHAY .....	1535
--------------------------------------	------

### Transient monoclonal gammopathy in hydralazine-induced lupus erythematosus

S FREESTONE, L E RAMSAY .....	1536
-------------------------------	------

### Branhamella catarrhalis infection of the lower respiratory tract: reliable diagnosis by sputum examination

PETER E THORNLEY, JOHN AITKEN, CHRISTOPHER J DRENNAN, JOHN MACVICAR, NICHOLAS J SLEVIN .....	1537
--	------

### Repeated renal failure with use of captopril in a cystinotic renal allograft recipient

DAVID HOOKE, R G WALKER, N M A WALTER, A J F D'APICE, JUDITH A WHITWORTH, PRISCILLA KINCAID-SMITH .....	1538
---	------

### Bilateral abdominal lipohypertrophy after continuous subcutaneous infusion of insulin

A MIER, J WEERAKOON, P DANDONA .....	1539
--------------------------------------	------

### Acute colitis due to *Plesiomonas shigelloides*

B K MANDAL, K WHALE, B C MORSON .....	1539
---------------------------------------	------

### Accuracy of early endoscopy in acute upper gastrointestinal bleeding

C ZAMBARTAS, R J CREGEEN, J A H FORREST, N D C FINLAYSON .....	1540
--	------

### Research in General Practice: Managing thyroid illness: a trainee group project

J G R HOWIE, A J M BUTT .....	1541
-------------------------------	------

### Prevention: who needs it?

NICK BLACK, P M STRONG .....	1543
------------------------------	------

## MEDICAL PRACTICE

### Autumn Books

Lost in words	BERNARD J FREEDMAN .....	1545
---------------	--------------------------	------

The Elizabeth Taylor of the Kalahari	RICHARD SMITH .....	1547
--------------------------------------	---------------------	------

Archetypal form of drug abuse	MARTIN PLANT .....	1548
-------------------------------	--------------------	------

Not yet the medical "DNB"	STEPHEN LOCK .....	1549
---------------------------	--------------------	------

Pictorial education for families	ANDREW CROWTHER .....	1550
----------------------------------	-----------------------	------

What's new in the new editions?	CLIFFORD HAWKINS .....	1556
---------------------------------	------------------------	------

ABC of Brain Stem Death: Diagnosis of brain stem death—I	CHRISTOPHER PALLIS .....	1558
--	--------------------------	------

Essentials of Health Economics: Part V—Assessing the costs and benefits of treatment alternatives	M F DRUMMOND, G H MOONEY .....	1561
---	--------------------------------	------

Letters to a Young Doctor: Try not to get locked into a specialty	PHILIP RHODES .....	1563
---	---------------------	------

Family Medicine: Thamesmead: dream to reality	P M HIGGINS .....	1564
---	-------------------	------

Any Questions?	.....	1557, 1566
----------------	-------	------------

Medicine and the Media—Contributions from JAMES OWEN DRIFE, J N L SIMSON, TESSA RICHARDS	.....	1567
--	-------	------

Personal View	P J TOGHILL .....	1568
---------------	-------------------	------

OBITUARY .....	1569	SUPPLEMENT
----------------	------	------------

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents .....	1570	The Week .....	1586
---------------------------------------	------	----------------	------

NEWS AND NOTES	.....	New session gets into swing	WILLIAM RUSSELL .....	1587
----------------	-------	-----------------------------	-----------------------	------

Views .....	1582	A new approach to the elderly	J M KELLETT .....	1588
-------------	------	-------------------------------	-------------------	------

Epidemiology—Whooping cough surveillance .....	1583	Using resources efficiently .....	1590
--	------	-----------------------------------	------

Medical News .....	1584	Körner Group urges changes in NHS statistics .....	1591
--------------------	------	--	------

BMA Notices .....	1585	Junior hospital doctors: hours of work circular .....	1591
-------------------	------	---	------

.....	1592	General practice: microcomputers; vandalism .....	1592
-------	------	---	------

.....	1592	More fee increases .....	1592
-------	------	--------------------------	------

# CORRESPONDENCE

<b>Death from asthma in two regions of England</b>	
A G Arnold, MRCP, and D J Lane, FRCP; N Masters, MB; S Shulman, MPS; P Sherwood Burge, MRCP.....	1570
<b>Antihypertensive treatment with beta-blockers in patients aged over 65</b>	
K O'Malley, FRCP, and E T O'Brien, FRCP.....	1571
<b>Multimodal treatment in operable breast cancer</b>	
C Trask, MB, and R L Souhami, FRCP; R E Waggener, MD; Anna Rossi, MD.....	1571
<b>Clostridium difficile in toxic megacolon</b>	
J L Templeton, FRCS.....	1572
<b>Thou shalt not strive officiously</b>	
J S M Zorab, FFARCS; S L Henderson Smith, BM; P J F Baskett, FFARCS, and G R Sowden, FFARCS.....	1573
<b>Does control of risk factors prevent coronary heart disease?</b>	
R W D Turner, FRCP.....	1573
<b>Thyrotoxic atrial fibrillation</b>	
J G Daly, MRCP, and others; A Martin, MD, and A J Camm, MRCP.....	1574
<b>The child who is slow to talk</b>	
J A Carr, MD; R J Robinson, FRCP.....	1574
<b>Penicillinase-producing <i>Neisseria gonorrhoeae</i> in Great Britain, 1977-81</b>	
V S Rajan, FRCPED, and T Thirumoorthy, MRCP.....	1575
<b>Childhood drownings in private swimming pools</b>	
Pincus Catzel, MB.....	1575
<b>Ranitidine in acute upper gastrointestinal haemorrhage</b>	
M J S Langman, FRCP, and D A Henry, MRCP; J Dawson, MRCP, and R Cockel, FRCP.....	1575
<b>Abnormal mammograms with no lump</b>	
J L Price, FRCP, and others; S J Leinster, FRCS.....	1576
<b>A case of Lassa fever</b>	
L Oppenheimer, MB.....	1576
<b>Impact of sex ratio on onset and management of labour</b>	
W M Hague, MRCP; Marion H Hall, FRCOG, and R Carr-Hill, DPhil.....	1577
<b>Postmenopausal osteoporosis</b>	
J M Aitken, FRCP.....	1577
<b>The GP and the specialist: gastroenterology</b>	
J Baillie, MRCP.....	1577
<b>Severe mental handicap: pathogenesis, treatment, and prevention</b>	
F Harris, FRCPED, and P O D Pharoah, FFCM.....	1578
<b>Metabolic consequences of salbutamol poisoning reversed by propranolol</b>	
L Corea, MD, and others.....	1578
<b>Chemoprophylaxis of malaria in Africa</b>	
L J Bruce-Chwatt, FRCP.....	1578
<b>Are you making the most of "Index Medicus"?</b>	
Lisa McCormick.....	1579
<b>Dietary protein energy supplementation of pregnant Asian mothers at Sorrento, Birmingham</b>	
Mary Campbell Brown, MB, and C E Rossiter, MA.....	1579
<b>The first five years of life</b>	
S Boll, MRCGP; G H Curtis Jenkins, MB.....	1579
<b>Does low dietary intake of linoleic acid predispose to myocardial infarction?</b>	
H C R Simpson, MRCP, and J I Mann, DM.....	1580
<b>Aflatoxins and kwashiorkor</b>	
H C Trowell, FRCP.....	1580
<b>Cot deaths and medical communication</b>	
D Loshak.....	1580
<b>Points</b> Ethics and in vitro fertilisation (R Newill); Atrial fibrillation (G S Crockett); Abnormal mammograms with no lump (R Reid); Are you making the most of "Index Medicus"? (CK Langley); Chemoprophylaxis of malaria in Africa (S S Bakshi); Paracetamol interference with blood glucose analysis (H E Sostman); Raised intraocular pressure—time for a rethink on referral procedure? (R D Finlay); A regimen of low dose aspirin? (A Levy); Chiropody and podiatry (G C Jenkins).....	1581

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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.

## Death from asthma in two regions of England

SIR.—This latest retrospective survey of the circumstances surrounding deaths from asthma (30 October, p 1251) follows many similar surveys conducted during the last 20 years.<sup>1-4</sup> It is distressing to note how similar the conclusions remain in the context of the continuing high mortality from this eminently treatable condition. Non-fatal cases of acute severe asthma are, of course, much more common than fatal cases, and one of the problems with this type of retrospective survey is that we learn nothing about the management of the whole spectrum of severe cases. Some data are available from Edinburgh,<sup>5</sup> but they are not necessarily typical since they come from an area that already operates a special admission service. We have accumulated data in the Oxford area by looking at cases managed outside hospital as well as those managed in hospital. Ours was a prospective survey in which there were no fatalities; it is described fully elsewhere.<sup>6-8</sup>

Most of the factors found to be associated with death by the British Thoracic Association were equally common in our group of patients with non-fatal acute severe asthma. We also found that many attacks had a rapid speed of onset.<sup>6</sup> Patients tended to have a history of

frequent previous severe episodes and to be poorly supervised. In addition, they were inadequately treated before the index attack, adjusted their treatment inappropriately during the attack, and received treatment from their general practitioner which was less satisfactory than standard recommendations.<sup>8</sup> Encouraging findings in our study were the speed with which the general practitioners responded to the emergency calls and the infrequent use of sedative drugs. We suspect that the inadequate management described in this latest series of deaths from asthma is not confined to the few fatal cases but is widespread.

In our study general practitioners saw patients infrequently,<sup>7</sup> perhaps not often enough to maintain a high level of expertise. Given the increasing rate of self referrals to hospital<sup>7,9</sup> we believe that there is sufficient evidence to justify a shift of the primary care role towards hospital by the provision of emergency direct admission services even though this might be opposed by some general practitioners.<sup>10</sup> If all of the most severe cases are to be seen in hospital then the number of admissions could increase threefold,<sup>7</sup> thus necessitating more facilities. Few centres

seem to be initiating this service—perhaps another example of the failure of the National Health Service in the present adverse economic climate.

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- <sup>1</sup> Cochrane GM, Clark TJH. *Thorax* 1975;30:300-5.
- <sup>2</sup> Macdonald JB, Seaton A, Williams DA. *Br Med J* 1976;i:1493-5.
- <sup>3</sup> Macdonald JB, Macdonald ET, Seaton A, Williams DA. *Br Med J* 1976;iii:721-3.
- <sup>4</sup> Ormerod LP, Stableforth DE. *Br Med J* 1980;280:687-90.
- <sup>5</sup> Cooke NJ, Crompton GK, Grant IWB. *Br J Dis Chest* 1979;73:157-63.
- <sup>6</sup> Arnold AG, Lane DJ, Zapata E. *Br J Dis Chest* 1982;76:157-63.
- <sup>7</sup> Arnold AG, Lane DJ, Zapata E. *Br J Dis Chest* (in press).
- <sup>8</sup> Arnold AG, Lane DJ, Zapata E. *Br J Dis Chest* (in press).
- <sup>9</sup> Anderson HR, Bailey P, West S. *Br Med J* 1980;281:1191-4.
- <sup>10</sup> Anonymous. *J R Coll Gen Pract* 1981;31:323-4.

SIR.—The British Thoracic Association's article on deaths from asthma in two regions of England (30 October, p 1251) states that