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LEADING ARTICLES

Exercise, health, and medicine

- J N MORRIS 1597
Hypocholesterolaemia and cancer?
KENNETH G TAYLOR 1598

- Antivivisection** O L WADE 1599
Psychosocial factors in the cause and prevention of relapse in schizophrenia S R HIRSCH .. 1600
Pay review in an election year 1602

CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

- Hypocholesterolaemia and non-cardiovascular disease: metabolic studies on subjects with low plasma cholesterol concentrations**
C B MARENAH, B LEWIS, D HASSALL, A LA VILLE, C CORTESE, W D MITCHELL, K R BRUCKDORFER, B SLAVIN, N E MILLER, P R TURNER, E HEDUAN 1603
- Advanced carcinoma of the prostate: treatment with a gonadotrophin releasing hormone agonist**
J M ALLEN, J P O'SHEA, K MASHITER, G WILLIAMS, S R BLOOM 1607
- Bulimia nervosa, binge eating, and psychogenic vomiting: a controlled treatment study and long term outcome** J HUBERT LACEY 1609
- Toxic shock syndrome and endocarditis** M WHITBY, S FRASER, C G GEMMELL, P A WRIGHT 1613
- Pneumocystis pneumonia and disseminated toxoplasmosis in a male homosexual** W R GRANSDEN, P M BROWN 1614
- Finger sepsis: possible complication of self monitoring of blood glucose concentrations**
EDMOND A RYAN, JOSHUA MILLER, JAY S SKYLER 1614
- Combination treatment with tamoxifen and aminoglutethimide in advanced breast cancer**
IAN E SMITH, ADRIAN L HARRIS, ROBIN STUART-HARRIS, HUBERT T FORD, JEAN-CLAUDE GAZET, HARVEY WHITE, CLIVE L HARMER, LORNA CARR, J ALAN MCKINNA, MICHAEL MORGAN 1615
- Clinically apparent rubella reinfection with a detectable rubella specific IgM response**
P MORGAN-CAPNER, C BURGESS, R M IRELAND, J C SHARP 1616
- Practice Research: Use of cephalixin to treat glandular fever: pilot study** JOVO LAKIC 1617
- Overlapping with General Practice: Marriage guidance counsellor** ANITA BLUM 1619

MEDICAL PRACTICE

- For Debate: Should homosexuals be vaccinated against hepatitis B virus? Cost and benefit assessment**
MICHAEL WADLER, ELIZABETH M BELSEY, J ALLEN McCUTCHAN, ADRIAN MINDEL 1621
- New Drugs: Vitamin D metabolites and analogues, diphosphonates, danazol, and bromocriptine** COLIN R PATERSON, JOHN FEELY ... 1625
- Communicable Diseases: Penicillinase-producing Neisseria gonorrhoeae in Britain 1982**
PREPARED BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORY SERVICE COMMUNICABLE DISEASE SURVEILLANCE CENTRE AND THE COMMUNICABLE DISEASES (SCOTLAND) UNIT WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT OF GENITOURINARY MEDICINE, MIDDLESEX HOSPITAL MEDICAL SCHOOL 1628
- Aviation Medicine: Acceleration II: Short duration acceleration** F JOHN MILLS, RICHARD M HARDING 1630
- Hospital Topics: The needle necropsy** J C E UNDERWOOD, D N SLATER, M A PARSONS 1632
- Letters to a Young Doctor: Postgraduate education** PHILIP RHODES 1635
- Contemporary Themes: Exercise: cult or cure-all?** TONY SMITH 1637
- Lesson of the Week: Apparent microcephaly caused by a bicornuate uterus**
ROBIN M WINTER, JOHN DEARLOVE, HUGH JOLLY, M PAWSON, RICHARD G WILSON 1640
- Any Questions?** 1641
- Materia Non Medica—Contributions from R TILSTON AUSTIN, G S CROCKETT, D GREEN** 1634
- Medicine and Books** 1642
- Personal View** DAVID STONE 1646

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents 1647

OBITUARY 1658

NEWS AND NOTES

- Views** 1654
- Election manifestos** 1655
- Medical News** 1656
- BMA Notices** 1656, 1668
- One Man's Burden** MICHAEL O'DONNELL 1657

PROCUREMENT SECTION SUPPLEMENT

- The Week** 1660
- Independent FPCs: Labour's price for health Bill**
WILLIAM RUSSELL 1661
- The 1983 pay review: Government phases award: full rates from January 1984** 1662
- Actual and intended net remuneration for general practitioners** 1665
- Junior hospital doctors' hours of work** 1666
- Examples of salary scales** 1667
- BMA's evidence to review body for 1983-4 award** 1669
- Health Departments' evidence** 1674
- From the CCHMS: Use of resources in the NHS** 1677

CORRESPONDENCE

Non-hormonal treatment of osteoporosis

J C Stevenson, MRCP, and M I Whitehead, MRCP; S M Garn, FAAP, V M Hawthorne, FRCM; C Nagant de Deuxchaisnes, MD, and others..... 1647

Problem drinking among drunk drivers

J Nightingale, MRCP..... 1648

Can mental illness be simulated?

J Gunn, FRCPsych, and Pamela Taylor, MRCPsych..... 1649

Therapeutic abortion and chlamydial infection

Angela Mills, MRCP..... 1649

Infant chlamydial pneumonia

P Rudd, MRCP, and D Carrington, MB..... 1649

Generic substitution

R W Blamey, MD; E S Snell, FRCP..... 1649

Adverse reactions to drugs

K Detering, MD, and R A Wiseman, LRCP... 1650

New drugs: beta blockers and sympathomimetics

Rodney Cove-Smith, FRCP, and Christine A Kirk, MRCPsych; R M Graham, FRACP... 1650

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome

J M McLean, MD, and others..... 1651

Doctors one, priests one

Joyce L Dunlop, MRCPsych; M Platten, MB 1651

Unilateral somatic symptoms due to hyperventilation

C Thompson..... 1652

Total parenteral nutrition

C R Pennington, MD, and J M Richards, MPS..... 1652

Responsibility for prescribing

P V Scott, FFARCS..... 1652

Points: Inaccuracies in measuring tourniquet pressures (L Klenerman; K B Carter and A Shaw); False false teeth (A Ajdukiewicz); Which way general practice? (S D Ford); Lumbar puncture in spontaneous sub-arachnoid haemorrhage (R A Daws, and A J Keogh); Letters to a young doctor (Frada Eskin); Unequal legs (F J Imms); A misplaced medal (H M Spiro)..... 1653

Correction: Dexamethasone in cerebral malaria (Warrell)..... 1652

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. Letters critical of a paper may be sent to the authors of the paper so that their reply may appear in the same issue.

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.

Non-hormonal treatment of osteoporosis

SIR,—Dr A St J Dixon (25 March, p 999) implies that insufficient calcium intake is responsible for loss of bone mineral and that dietary supplementation of calcium will prevent it. He gives little evidence, however, to support this view.

As discussed in our recent review,¹ and in subsequent correspondence, there is no good evidence that oral calcium supplements can prevent the commonest forms of osteoporosis—that is, postmenopausal and senile. Furthermore, contrary to the statement that the failure of Western society to consume enough calcium must inevitably lead to a loss of bone mineral, osteoporosis is in fact more common in societies with a high calcium intake than in those with a low calcium intake.²

The claim that microcrystalline hydroxyapatite protects patients with rheumatoid arthritis having corticosteroid treatment from the usual accelerated loss of bone is not fully substantiated by his own study.³ Compared with controls the patients treated with microcrystalline hydroxyapatite had a small but significant reduction in loss of radial bone density when calculated as bone mineral content/bone width, but not when calculated as percentage of initial density. Since there was no difference in loss of ulnar bone density between treated patients and controls, it is extremely difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions.

The second study quoted using microcrystalline hydroxyapatite was a trial of treatments for a rare cause of osteoporosis—primary biliary cirrhosis.⁴ The findings were that microcrystalline hydroxyapatite reversed the bone loss which is normally seen in this condition. These findings, however, were based on metacarpal morphometry using Garn's index,⁵ which has several shortcomings

as an assessment of bone mass.⁶ In any event, no information on the treatment of other types of osteoporosis can be derived from the study. Certainly, accurate assessments of bone mass by total body calcium measurements using neutron activation analysis have again shown that large oral calcium supplements are unable to stop bone loss in women with postmenopausal osteoporosis.⁷

Fluoride treatment seems to have some effect on osteoporosis by stimulating bone formation. It is not fully established, however, whether the bone thus formed has normal strength and can give the mechanical advantage required in this condition. Riggs *et al*⁸ suggested that fluoride treatment can reduce vertebral fracture rates in women with postmenopausal osteoporosis, although it was not as effective as oestrogen in this respect. It would be preferable, however, to see the results of a study where treatment allocations were randomised before drawing firm conclusions. A place for fluoride in the treatment of osteoporosis needs to be established, but the fact that about 40% of patients treated with the necessary doses of fluoride had adverse reactions⁹ is always likely to limit its use.

At a time when osteoporosis is, if anything, on the increase⁹ we think that it is most regrettable that the myth of calcium supplementation alone being effective in either the prevention or treatment of osteoporosis should continue to be potentiated.

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¹ Stevenson JC, Whitehead MI. Postmenopausal osteoporosis. *Br Med J* 1982;**285**:585-8.

² Chalmers J, Ho KC. Geographical variations in senile osteoporosis. *J Bone Joint Surg* 1970;**52B**:667-75.

³ Nilsen KH, Jaysen MIV, Dixon A St J. Microcrystalline calcium hydroxyapatite compound in corticosteroid-treated rheumatoid patients: a controlled study. *Br Med J* 1978;**ii**:1124.

⁴ Epstein O, Kato Y, Dick R, Sherlock S. Vitamin D, hydroxyapatite, and calcium gluconate in treatment of cortical bone thinning in postmenopausal women with primary biliary cirrhosis. *Am J Clin Nutr* 1982;**36**:426-50.

⁵ Garn SM. *The earlier gain and later loss of cortical bone*. Springfield, Illinois: Thomas, 1970.

⁶ Doyle FH. Involutional osteoporosis. In: MacIntyre I, ed. *Clinics in endocrinology and metabolism*. London: Saunders, 1972;143-67.

⁷ Chesnut CH, Baylink DJ, Roos BA, *et al*. Calcitonin and postmenopausal osteoporosis. In: Pecile A, ed. *Calcitonin 1980. Chemistry, physiology, pharmacology and clinical aspects*. Amsterdam: Excerpta Medica, 1981:247-55.

⁸ Riggs BL, Seeman E, Hodgson SF, Taves DR, O'Fallon WM. Effect of the fluoride/calcium regimen on vertebral fracture occurrence in postmenopausal osteoporosis. *N Engl J Med* 1982;**306**:446-50.

⁹ Lewis AF. Fracture of neck of the femur: changing incidence. *Br Med J* 1981;**283**:1217-20.

SIR,—The leading article by Dr Allan St J Dixon (26 March, p 999) reiterates two notions about bone loss that were popular two decades ago. The first is that adult bone loss is a relatively recent phenomenon among Western peoples on a diet rather high in animal protein, say 60 g/day. The second is that it is associated with a low calcium intake and can be prevented by calcium intakes of 1 g/day and more.

From national and international studies conducted over the last two decades we have learnt that adult "osteoporosis" is international and by no means restricted to women in the Western world.¹ It exists in American Indians and Japanese, Jamaicans and Eskimos, Guatemalan Indians and Yugoslavians, Chinese and Greeks, and in American blacks.² Indeed, there is no population not characterised by bone loss after the age of 40, and all