

BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

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SATURDAY 15 OCTOBER 1983

LEADING ARTICLES

- Duchenne muscular dystrophy DAVID GARDNER-MEDWIN 1083
Oncogenes and carcinogenesis MIRANDA ROBERTSON .. 1084
Inner cities: time for a cure? K J BOLDEN 1086

- The employment of diabetics JOHN LISTER 1087
The lupus anticoagulant GRAHAM R V HUGHES 1088
Malaria vaccination W PETERS 1089

CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

- Immunological abnormalities in haemophilia: are they caused by American factor VIII concentrate?
KARIN S FROEBEL, RAJAN MADHOK, CHARLES D FORBES, SUSAN E LENNIE, GORDON D O LOWE, ROGER D STURROCK 1091
Gonadal function in men treated for acute leukaemia J WAXMAN, Y TERRY, L H REES, T A LISTER 1093
Reversal of changes in distribution of gestational age and birth weight among firstborn infants of Cardiff residents R G NEWCOMBE .. 1095
Excess mortality among children discharged from hospital after treatment for diarrhoea in rural Bangladesh
S K ROY, A K M A CHOWDHURY, M M RAHAMAN 1097
Comparison between penicillamine and sulphasalazine in rheumatoid arthritis: Leeds-Birmingham trial
V C NEUMANN, K A GRINDULIS, S HUBBALL, B McCONKEY, V WRIGHT 1099
Sulphasalazine in rheumatoid arthritis: a double blind comparison of sulphasalazine with placebo and sodium aurothiomalate
T PULLAR, J A HUNTER, H A CAPELL 1102
Peptic ulcer in Reye's syndrome R MANNING, P J KEARNEY 1105
Treatment of cutaneous leishmaniasis by curettage MICHAEL A CURRIE 1105
Implications of diagnostic delay in Duchenne muscular dystrophy T O'BRIEN, J R SIBERT, P S HARPER 1106
Plasma prolactin concentrations in a large population of healthy old people
S GOVONI, G PASINETTI, M TRABUCCHI, M R INZOLI, R ROZZINI 1107
Morbidity in diabetic and non-diabetic patients after major vascular surgery ALLAN HJORTTRUP, BO FELDT RASMUSSEN, HENRIK KEHLET . 1107
Sciatic neuropathies J D STEWART, E ANGUS, D GENDRON 1108
Seasonal variation in incidence of brachial and femoral emboli CHARLES V CLARK 1109
Wheelchairs used by old people E HAWORTH, R H POWELL, G P MULLEY 1109
Use of home insemination in programmes of artificial insemination with donor semen
EILEEN A McLAUGHLIN, PETER D BROMWICH, ANNA M MACKEN, ANDREW P WALKER, JOHN R NEWTON 1110
Practice Research: Laboratory and radiological investigations in general practice: II—Expectation and outcome
K A MILLS, P M REILLY 1111
A Difficult Case: Lesley DAVID FARROW 1114

MEDICAL PRACTICE

- General surgical workload in England and Wales TIMOTHY G ALLEN-MERSH, RICHARD J EARLAM 1115
Control and prevention of tuberculosis: a code of practice JOINT TUBERCULOSIS COMMITTEE OF THE BRITISH THORACIC SOCIETY 1118
Style in medical journals DIANA E ADAMS SMITH 1122
Results of large scale media antismoking campaign in Australia: North Coast "Quit for Life" programme
G EGGER, W FITZGERALD, G FRAPE, A MONAEM, P RUBINSTEIN, C TYLER, B MCKAY 1125
USSR Letter: Judicial investigation of complaints MICHAEL RYAN 1129
Lesson of the Week: Too much heparin: possible source of error in blood gas an
A S HUTCHISON, S H RALSTON, F J DRYBURGH, M SMALL, I FOGELMAN 1131
Any Questions? 1130
Materia Non Medica—Contribution from N C ECCLES 1133
Medicine and Books 1136
What's new in the new editions? CLIFFORD HAWKINS 1138
Medicine and the Media—Contributions from L LUZZATTO, TRISHA GREENHALGH 1139
Personal View KEVIN M DE COCK 1140

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CURRENT SERIAL RECORDS

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents 1140

OBITUARY 1145

NEWS AND NOTES

- Views 1147
Medical News 1148
BMA Notices 1148
One Man's Burden
MICHAEL O'DONNELL 1149

SUPPLEMENT

- The Week 1150
From the HJSC: Health Service resources and manpower;
committee wants BMA to meet Prime Minister 1151
BMA council debates cuts 1153
From the CCHMS: Anxieties over Health Service cuts 1154

CORRESPONDENCE

Trimming fat or cutting bone? G Mooney, MA.....	1140	Twelfth rib syndrome F F Casale, FFARCS; D G Machin, FRCS, and J M Shennan, FRCS.....	1142	Medical treatment of portal hypertension and oesophageal varices P Calès, MD, and others.....	1144
Congenital toxoplasmosis H Williams, MD, and others.....	1140	Anorexia nervosa M K Thompson, FRCGP.....	1142	Royal Medical Benevolent Fund Christmas Appeal 1983 Dame Josephine Barnes, FRCOG.....	1144
Oral rehydration W A M Cutting, FRCP, and Katherine M Elliott, MFCM.....	1141	Epileptic seizures in general practice J B P Stephenson, FRCP; D M G Good- ridge, MRCGP, and S D Shorvon, MD.....	1143	Manpower problems F S A Doran, MD.....	1144
Adjuvant chemotherapy for early breast cancer A U Buzdar, MD, and others; L A Price, MD.....	1141	Dihydrocodeine overdose treated with naloxone infusion I J Gordon, MRCP, and H L Gordon, FFARCS.....	1143	Risk to frontline medical care S D Ford, MB.....	1144
New criteria and classification for diabetes mellitus E J Hindle, and G M Rostron; C Sander- son.....	1142	Sickle haemoglobin and pregnancy Susan M Tuck, and J Studd, MRCOG.....	1143	Babies' bottoms D Isaacs, MRCP.....	1144

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.

Trimming fat or cutting bone?

SIR,—It is good to see the *BMJ* (17 September, p 780) recognising, even if somewhat belatedly, that "clinicians may have to accept that they can no longer claim total freedom to order investigations and prescribe treatments as they think best" and that "doctors should be seen to be willing to cooperate in efforts to improve their cost effectiveness."

It would be even more welcome if these sentiments were accompanied by a willingness on the part of the profession to try to understand what cost effectiveness and other forms of economic analysis entail. Certainly in the correspondence courses in health economics which we run from this department, we find administrators, nurses, finance staff, etc.—and indeed community medicine specialists—applying in goodly numbers. Yet, with a closing date for next year's courses of 31 October, we again find, as in previous years, that applications from hospital clinicians and general practitioners are very few. Is it that

they do not want to know about economics? Or do they think (falsely in the vast majority of cases) that they already do know?

The Danish Medical Association is adopting a different tack from that of the BMA in its somewhat similar plight of facing cuts in health care spending. It is considering setting up courses in health economics to allow Danish doctors to understand the language of economics and thereby better equip the profession with the necessary skills for dealing with problems of scarce resources. Certainly it takes nearly as long to train as an economist as it does to train as a doctor. But for doctors to train in the basic way of thinking of economics—if they show willing, of course—can be achieved in a few months.

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Congenital toxoplasmosis

SIR,—It may be of interest to add some current data from Scotland (17 September, p 835) to the epidemiological analysis of congenital toxoplasmosis in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland 1975-80 (13 August, p 453).

The Scottish prospective survey mentioned by Dr Susan M Hall was carried out in the west of Scotland during the years 1975-8¹; since then two further antenatal populations in Scotland have been examined, one in central Scotland based on Perth from 1979 to 1983, and the other in Inverness from 1980 to 1983. The central Scotland study was in abridged form and was concerned mainly with the possibilities of detecting infection in antenatal populations in a multidisciplinary

laboratory using a simple haemagglutination screening test; the Inverness study was part of a combined survey of antenatal patients for rubella, cytomegalovirus, and toxoplasma infection,² using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay tests for toxoplasma IgG and IgM³ antibodies with confirmatory dye tests, and the investigation is still incomplete. The results are as follows.

Perth—Haemagglutination tests on an antenatal population of about 7000 in four years showed 24 women to have a dye test titre of $\geq 1/512$. In five the presence of specific IgM was confirmed. These figures would indicate a range of maternal infection from one in 300 to one in 400 pregnancies. One neonatal death occurred in the group, thought to be

due to toxoplasmosis, and one placenta yielded the parasite, although the baby in this pregnancy and all other babies in the group appeared normal at birth.

Inverness—A total of 4245 pregnancies have been followed up using booking blood and cord blood serum only. At first examination 17% of women were seropositive; only three seroconversions were detected, all at low level. Eleven women had dye test titres of $\geq 1/512$ at some time during pregnancy, and specific IgM was detected in three of them. Specific IgM was also detected in two women where dye test titres were less than 1/512. Thus the serological evidence for current infection in pregnancy was maximally 16 and minimally probably three, somewhere between 1 in 250 and one in 1500. So far only one baby is definitely infected, and there has been one neonatal death in the group. All the other babies in these pregnancies appeared normal at birth. Toxoplasma was recovered from only one placenta out of four examined.

The number of maternal infections detected in Perth and Inverness is considerably lower than that found earlier in the west of Scotland, where the maternal infection calculated on the same basis ranged from one in 50 to one in 400. This may have been due to the inherent limitations of the later surveys, but it coincides also with a decrease, first noted in 1979, in the overall numbers of new cases of toxoplasmosis diagnosed yearly in Scotland. Whatever the maternal infection rate, a major difficulty lies in ascertaining infection in infants in the absence of clinical signs, and in our experience infection can seldom be shown where maternal seroconversion has been at a low level, even when sensitive IgM enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay tests are used. There do seem to be differences in the incidence and severity of congenital toxoplasmosis between Britain and mainland Europe; what gives rise to these differences is hard to pinpoint; perhaps the tendency