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We may shorten letters to the editor unless the authors specifically state that we may not. This is so that we can offer our readers as wide a selection of letters as possible. We receive so many letters each week that we have to omit some of them. Letters must 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.

Four million patients who failed to attend

SIR,—In 1977 I asked a medical student, now Dr P A Oliver, to conduct a study into non-attenders (23 June, p 1928) at the outpatient clinics of the Nottingham City Hospital,¹ where I was a consultant physician and the nephrologist. I was concerned about the wasted time for myself and the administrative staff as a result of missed appointments. There are some whose non-attendance should not be ignored as the implications for them and for the service can be very serious. The loss from follow up has resulted in the death of some patients with failed kidney function who might with supervision have been kept alive using their own kidney function.

Our study in 1978 showed that half of the patients recorded as "did not attend" considered that this was the result of the hospital failing to cancel an appointment after an attempt by the patient to cancel it. It remains uncertain whether their information or that in the hospital records was correct. The rest of the missed appointments mostly resulted from 12% of patients who regularly defaulted. This 12% had accounted for 76% of all the missed outpatient appointments in the previous year. We concluded that it should be possible to predict who would cause most of the missed

appointments, and counselling individual patients should reduce the size of the problem.

Our suggestions for future research were for larger studies, which are now being requested at this time of increased political interest. We also suggested a cost benefit analysis of a computerised appointments system. My current view is that the problem may still most often be one of a failure of human beings to do simple and obvious things rather than one of non-existent computers, and improving the effectiveness of individuals should share priority with any drive to introduce computing. Some plans to introduce administrative computing should perhaps be slowed up until the simpler problems are resolved: new technology can sometimes divert senior staff from supervising and monitoring human activities using more old fashioned methods.

Another reason for carefully considering the speed at which administrative computing systems should be introduced is the important contribution that computers should be making to patient care. This is sometimes being delayed because administrative systems are getting most of the attention and most of the money. The potential to improve management by

better and faster diagnosis, or by computer controlled or monitored treatment, is not being fully exploited.

The result of implementing good clinical patient care computing can be better administration as well. The quality of data recording, and of data transfer can be much greater when the clinical team are regularly using a computer based record system. Administrators can then have reliable facts on which to make decisions without the introduction of major linked administrative systems. I am not yet convinced that good administrative computing will not in the first phases of its introduction slow down the rate of improvement in health service administration.

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¹ Oliver PAD. "Did not attend": an outpatient problem. Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 1978, 80 pp. (Dissertation).

SIR,—After Mr William Russell's article you may like to hear from one of the "four million who failed to attend" (23 June, p 1928).