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SATURDAY 7 SEPTEMBER 1985

## LEADING ARTICLES

Artificial insemination by donor	T B HARGREAVE	613
Hospital clinical records	ALEXANDRA NICOL, JULIA SHEPPARD	614
Plasma exchange for Guillain-Barré syndrome	RICHARD A C HUGHES	615
PHLS reform. Professional advisers' views over-ruled		616
Regular Review: Lessons from ambulatory electrocardiography	M C PETCH	617

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

HLA-DRw6 as a risk factor for active cytomegalovirus but not for herpes simplex virus infection after renal allograft transplantation	H W ROENHORST, A M TEGZESS, J M BEELEN, J M MIDDELDORP, T H THE	619
Lack of relation between glycosylated haemoglobin concentrations and number of daily insulin injections: cross sectional study in care of ambulatory diabetes	CARL-DAVID AGARDH, GUSTAV TALLROTH	622
Suppression of secondary hyperparathyroidism in children with chronic renal failure by high dose phosphate binders: calcium carbonate versus aluminium hydroxide	R H K MAK, C TURNER, THEA THOMPSON, HELEN POWELL, G B HAYCOCK, C CHANTLER	623
Simple mechanical methods for cardioversion: defence of the precordial thump and cough version	G CALDWELL, G MILLAR, ELIZABETH QUINN, R VINCENT, D A CHAMBERLAIN	627
Snoring as a risk factor for disease: an epidemiological survey	PETER G NORTON, EARL V DUNN	630
Carbamazepine induced systemic lupus erythematosus: case report	D E BATEMAN	632
Polymicrobial infection in campylobacter enteritis	I MELAMED, Y BUJANOVER, Z SPIRER, D SCHWARTZ, N CONFORTY	633
Campylobacter colitis with intestinal aphthous ulceration mimicking obstruction	D BENTLEY, J LYNN, J W LAWS	634
Topical rubefacient ointment: studies on haemostasis	C R J SINGER, H HAMBLEY, I D WALKER, J F DAVIDSON	634
Cutaneous amoebiasis: case report	L TURNER, D M JONES, J DAVSON	635
Antagonism of ceftazidime by chloramphenicol in vitro and in vivo during treatment of Gram negative meningitis	G L FRENCH, T K W LING, D P DAVIES, D T Y LEUNG	636
Reversal of liver damage due to long term methyltestosterone and safety of non-17 $\alpha$ -alkylated androgens	C P LOWDELL, IAIN M MURRAY-LYON	637
Unreviewed Reports—Acceptance of measles and pertussis immunisation (PUGH and HENSON), Exacerbation of hypersensitivity by hydrocortisone (MARKOS and SAWERS), Gastric outlet obstruction and pericholecystic abscess (KAPOOR and SHARMA), Chylothorax: rare complication of childhood empyema (COOPER and GRIFFIN), Polyneuropathy and myalgia and Y enterocolitica infection (PETERSEN and FRIIS), Autoimmune hypothyroidism and iron deficiency anaemia (GREEN and DAHILL)		638
Effect of computer use in the consultation on the delivery of care	GARRY BROWNBRIDGE, ALAN EVANS, TOBY WALL	639
Audit Report: Chlorthalidone treatment in patients with hypertension associated with hypokalaemia	SKERRETT	642

## MEDICAL PRACTICE

Contemporary Themes: Formal and informal support received by carers of elderly dependants	DEE A JONES, NORMAN J VETTER	643
For Debate: New programme of antenatal care in general practice	G N MARSH	646
Research from the South: Treatment of tetanus: an open study to compare the efficacy of procaine penicillin and metronidazole	IBRAHIM AHMADSYAH, AGIL SALIM	648
Timing of lumbar puncture in severe childhood meningitis	J R HARPER, J LORBER, G HILLAS SMITH, B D BOWER, S J EYKYN	651
Deaths from peptic ulceration	T V TAYLOR	653
ABC of Nutrition: Obesity: diagnosis and risks	A STEWART TRUSWELL	655
Communicable Diseases: National survey of notifications of tuberculosis in England and Wales in 1983	MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL TUBERCULOSIS AND CHEST DISEASES UNIT	658
Lesson of the Week: Non-oliguric renal failure during treatment with mefenamic acid in elderly patients: a continuing problem	ALI TAHA, RICHARD J LENTON, PETER S MURDOCH, NORMAN R PEDEN	661
Letter from Sydney: The doctors' strike—a temporary peace	PETER C ARNOLD	663
CSM Update		665
Materia Non Medica—Contribution from ANDREW PARKER		652
Medicine and Books		666
Medicine and the Media—Contributions from TONY SMITH, JOAN BICKNELL		670
Personal View	GILL WHALLEY	671

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents	672
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OBITUARY	679
----------	-----

## NEWS AND NOTES

Views	682
Medical News	683
BMA Notices	684

# CORRESPONDENCE

<b>Mortality of employees of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, 1946-79</b> Sarah C Darby, PHD, and others.....	672	<b>Antisecretory drugs and gastric cancer</b> D Jack, PHD, and others.....	675	<b>Effect of intravenous infusion of insulin in diabetics with acute myocardial infarction</b> R J Jarrett, FRCM; G A Oswald, MRCP, and J S Yudkin, MD; R S Clark, MRCP; B L Pentecost, FRCP, and others.....	677
<b>Paediatric anaesthesia</b> C Richards, MRCP; S Holt, FRCS; Nancy G S Fisher, FFARCS, and others.....	672	<b>Medical patients aged 65 and over admitted to an accident and emergency department</b> G Freeman, MRCP, and P Burke, MRCP; E M Sanderson, MRCP, and others; S P Bullimore, MB; M Wilkinson, MB; Gillian H Jenner, MRCP.....	675	<b>Test tube babies today</b> A Trounson, PHD.....	678
<b>Gastric microflora</b> A C Swift, FRCS, and others.....	673	<b>Serum fructosamine concentration as a measure of blood glucose control in type I diabetes mellitus</b> E J Hindle, PHD, and R Glenise, MB.....	676	<b>Mrs Short turns prison visitor</b> P A Trafford, MB.....	678
<b>Co-trimoxazole toxicity</b> Sir Abraham Goldberg, FRCP.....	673	<b>Recruiting new principals in general practice</b> N E Early, MB.....	676	<b>Points</b> Eugenics and the Registrar General (D F Roberts); Polymyalgia rheumatica/giant cell arteritis in a Cambridge general practice (A Cameron); Psoriasis, alcohol, and liver disease (J T Alderdice); British and American spellings of technical words (J Dobbing).....	678
<b>British blood cholesterol values and the American consensus</b> Julian Tudor Hart, FRCP; A Macnair, MB.....	673	<b>Failure of acyclovir cream in treatment of herpes labialis</b> G W Raborn, DDS.....	677		
<b>Helping heroin addicts kick the habit</b> D C Drummond, MB.....	674				

*Because we receive many more letters than we have room to publish we may shorten those that we do publish to allow readers as wide a selection as possible. In particular, when we receive several letters on the same topic we reserve the right to abridge individual letters. Our usual policy is to reserve our correspondence columns for letters commenting on issues discussed recently (within six weeks) in the BMJ.*

*Letters critical of a paper may be sent to the authors of the paper so that their reply may appear in the same issue. We may also forward letters that we decide not to publish to the authors of the paper on which they comment.*

*Letters should not exceed 400 words and should be typed double spaced and signed by all authors, who should include their main degree.*

## Mortality of employees of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, 1946-79

SIR,—The papers by Dr Patricia Fraser and others and Dr Valerie Beral and others (17 August, p 435 and 440) on the mortality of UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) workers provide important contributions to knowledge about the likely effects of chronic exposure to low doses of ionising radiations. Taken in conjunction with the latest data for the workers at the Hanford nuclear plant in the United States, which relate to 15 992 white men who were employed at Hanford for at least two years and were followed to 1 January 1979,<sup>1,2</sup> they provide good evidence that the estimates of risk per unit dose of the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) were not far out, despite the fact that they were extrapolated from observations on men and women exposed acutely to much higher doses from the bomb explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki or from the use of radiotherapy. When combined (by weighting by approximate inverse variances) the UKAEA and Hanford data suggest that the risk of death from leukaemia is increased by about 1.3 per million person years per 10 mSv (1 rem) and that the risk of death from cancer of any type is increased by about 6.0 per million person years per 10 mSv, both of which estimates are, as it happens, about 1.5 times greater than the corresponding risks obtained by the ICRP by extrapolation from high doses received acutely.<sup>3</sup>

None of the above estimates can, of course, be as accurate as the one place of decimals cited for the risks per million person years would suggest. All the estimates have large standard errors, are qualified by many reservations about their accuracy by the investigators responsible for making them, and refer to slightly different lengths of follow up and to persons irradiated at different ages, both of which factors are known to affect materially the

subsequent risk of disease. In these circumstances the most striking conclusion to be drawn from the combined experience of the UKAEA and Hanford workers is, in our opinion, that the best estimates of the risks per unit dose are very similar to those that have been estimated from very different types of exposure, rather than that the 95% confidence limits vary so widely (from a protective effect to 13 and 8 times the ICRP risk for leukaemia and all cancers respectively). For such wide variation is inevitable if the true risks are as low as appears and the number of workers with exposures anywhere near to the recommended limit is so small.

When many types of cancer are examined individually it must be expected, as Dr Beral and colleagues point out, that some statistically significant relations between mortality and dose will be observed by chance. It is, therefore, of interest to note that neither the strong relation with dose observed for cancer of the prostate in the UK study nor the strong relation observed for myelomatosis in the US study was borne out in the sister study. When information from the two studies is combined the relations of these two types of cancer with dose are no longer significantly different from zero ( $p=0.31$  and  $p=0.07$ , two sided tests). Dr Beral and colleagues provide much supportive evidence to suggest that there was a special risk of cancer of the prostate in the UK workers, due perhaps to exposure to some unknown prostatic carcinogen associated with exposure to tritium. Such exposure may not have occurred at Hanford and the increased mortality from prostate cancer certainly needs investigation. The combined results of both studies can, however, be interpreted as suggesting that the atypically close associations with exposure to whole body penetrating radiation observed with cancer of the prostate and

with myelomatosis, in one or other of the studies taken separately, were both due to chance.

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- 1 Tolley HD, Marks S, Buchanan JA, Gilbert ES. A further update of the analysis of mortality of workers in a nuclear facility. *Radiation Research* 1983;95:211-3.
- 2 Gilbert ES. How much can be learned from populations exposed to low levels of radiation? *The Statistician* 1984;34:19-30.
- 3 International Commission on Radiological Protection. Recommendations of the International Commission on Radiological Protection. *Ann ICRP* 1977;1:No 26.

## Paediatric anaesthesia

SIR,—As both a parent and a one time anaesthetist I found Dr Adrian While's Personal View on the anaesthetic given to his daughter rather too close for comfort. His article was obviously even more uncomfortable for others and I was taken aback by the patronising nature of some of the replies (24 August, p 542): "I therefore prefer parents not to be present at induction." "I find [parents'] presence in the anaesthetic room intimidating." Anyone would think that it was the anaesthetists who were undergoing the operations.

These responses illustrate how doctors react to criticism even when that criticism is gently constructive and comes from a colleague. We usually respond by denying a problem, rationalising it in the interests of safety and efficiency, and then