

# BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

U.S. DEPT. OF HEALTH  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES  
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NOV 29 1985

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SATURDAY 16 NOVEMBER 1985

## LEADING ARTICLES

<b>Triumph over terror</b> DEREK RUSSELL DAVIS .....	1369
<b>Immunisation targets in Europe and Britain</b> NORMAN T BEGG, NORMAN D NOAH .....	1370
<b>Infiltrating lobular carcinoma of the breast</b> ANTHONY HOWELL, MARTIN HARRIS .....	1371
<b>Community care: rhetoric and action</b> DAPHNE GLOAG .....	1372

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

<b>Olsalazine in active ulcerative colitis</b> W S SELBY, G D BARR, A IRELAND, C H MASON, D P JEWELL .....	1373
<b>Possible mechanism for mianserin induced neutropenia associated with saturable elimination kinetics</b> J L O'DONNELL, J R SHARMAN, E J BEGG, B M COLLS, P W MOLLER .....	1375
<b>Desmopressin and bleeding time in patients with cirrhosis</b> ANDREW K BURROUGHS, KATHERINE MATTHEWS, MOHAMMED QADIRI, NIGEL THOMAS, PETER KERNOFF, EDWARD TUDDENHAM, NEIL MCINTYRE .....	1377
<b>Psychoneurotic symptomatology in the irritable bowel syndrome: a study of reporters and non-reporters</b> G W WELCH, L C HILLMAN, E W POMARE .....	1382
<b>Early neurological complications of coronary artery bypass surgery</b> PAMELA J SHAW, DAVID BATES, NIALL E F CARTLIDGE, DAVID HEAVISIDE, DESMOND G JULIAN, DAVID A SHAW .....	1384
<b>Importance of early tumour exacerbation in patients treated with long acting analogues of gonadotrophin releasing hormone for advanced prostatic cancer</b> JONATHAN WAXMAN, A MAN, W F HENDRY, H N WHITFIELD, G M BESSER, R C TIPTAFT, A M I PARIS, R T D OLIVER .....	1387
<b>Predominant wrist disease in rheumatoid arthritis associated with high concentration of IgA rheumatoid factor</b> ROBIN H WITHRINGTON, MARTIN H SEIFERT .....	1388
<b>The neglected hospital wheelchair</b> J B YOUNG, P W BELFIELD, B H MASCIE-TAYLOR, G P MULLEY .....	1388
<b>Macroamylasaemia: how common is it?</b> CATRIONA E L BOYLE, C G FRASER .....	1389
<b>Hazards of glass ampoules</b> N J SHAW, E G H LYALL .....	1390
<b>Do most practices have an age-sex register? Results of the West Midlands age-sex register study</b> ROBERT F COOPER .....	1391
<b>Essays on Practice: Should nurses practise prevention?</b> W REITH .....	1394

## MEDICAL PRACTICE

<b>Example of intermediate care: the new Lambeth Community Care Centre</b> ROGER HIGGS .....	1395
<b>Epidemiology: Effect of selective vaccination on rubella susceptibility and infection in pregnancy</b> CHRISTINE L MILLER, ELIZABETH MILLER, PETER J L SEQUEIRA, JOHN E CRADOCK-WATSON, MAURICE LONGSON, ELIZABETH C WISEBERG .....	1398
<b>For Debate: Cardiopulmonary resuscitation—American style</b> RICHARD O CUMMINS, MICKEY S EISENBERG .....	1401
<b>ABC of Nutrition: Enteral and parenteral nutrition</b> MILES IRVING .....	1404
<b>Occupationless Health: "I feel really ashamed": How does unemployment lead to poorer mental health?</b> RICHARD SMITH .....	1409
<b>Lesson of the Week: An unusual but easily treatable cause of dysphagia and dysarthria complicating stroke</b> A J WRIGHT .....	1412
<b>Any Questions?</b> .....	1397, 1403, 1408, 1415
<b>Medicine and the Media—Contributions from J H BARON, ALISON GREEN</b> .....	1413
<b>Materia Non Medica—Contributions from C L DAVIDSON, LÉON SHIRLAW</b> .....	1414
<b>Medicolegal: First successful court challenge to GMC charges</b> CLARE DYER .....	1415
<b>Medicine and Books</b> .....	1416
<b>Personal View—STEPHEN HOLT</b> .....	1419

<b>CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents</b> .....	1420
--	------

<b>OBITUARY</b> .....	1433
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## NEWS AND NOTES

<b>Views</b> .....	1429
<b>Medical News</b> .....	1430
<b>BMA Notices</b> .....	1432

## SUPPLEMENT

<b>The Week</b> .....	1435
<b>Radicals versus consolidators</b> PHILIP JOHNSTON .....	1436
<b>Cost of operating a nuclear magnetic resonance imaging system</b> G R CHERRYMAN .....	1437
<b>Use of electronic mail for patient record transmission</b> JOHN F COWIE .....	1439
<b>GMC defers decision on contraceptive advice to under 16s</b> .....	1441
<b>Pharmacists' contract: campaign to hasten implementation</b> .....	1442

# CORRESPONDENCE

<b>How accurate are quotations and references in medical journals?</b> A S St Leger, MFCM; P Butcher, MPSYCH, and H Davis, PHD; S R Lowry, MB . . . . .	1420	<b>Intrauterine growth retardation</b> J P Calvert, MRCOG, and J F Pearson, FRCOG; M D M Hadley, FRCR . . . . .	1423	<b>Is the incidence of ectopic pregnancy rising?</b> Ruth M Hussey, MB, and G D Entwistle, MRCOG . . . . .	1426
<b>Can a fetus feel pain?</b> T H H G Koh, MRCP, and others; R Towey, FFARCS . . . . .	1421	<b>Generic prescribing</b> M J Aylett, MRCGP . . . . .	1424	<b>Safety of cimetidine</b> N Ali, BM, and others . . . . .	1426
<b>Prolonged use of nitrazepam for epilepsy in children with tuberous sclerosis</b> Jennifer Dennis, DM, and Ann Hunt, BA . . . . .	1421	<b>Pathological vertebral fractures after spinal manipulation</b> D Binnie, MCSP, and A M Hoy, FRCR . . . . .	1424	<b>Honorary injustice for medical teachers</b> J P Payne, FFARCS . . . . .	1427
<b>Process and outcome of care for patients with ovarian cancer</b> F G Lawton, MRCOG, and G R P Blackledge, MD . . . . .	1421	<b>AIDS antibody testing and counselling</b> G H Hall, FRCP . . . . .	1424	<b>Imported malaria in Britain</b> C Walton, MRCP . . . . .	1427
<b>Coma and brain stem areflexia in brain stem encephalitis</b> Amer S N Al-Din, MRCP, and others . . . . .	1422	<b>Sulpiride and the potentiation of progestogen only contraception</b> A A Schiff, MRCS . . . . .	1424	<b>Communication from centres of excellence</b> C Barber, MRCGP . . . . .	1427
<b>Proposal for ethical standards in therapeutic trials</b> A V Pollock, FRCS; R J Walden, MB, and B N C Prichard, FRCP; W A Silverman, MD . . . . .	1422	<b>Controlled trial of Iodosorb</b> M C E Ormiston, FRCS, and J A Fox, FRCS . . . . .	1424	<b>Occupationless health</b> E Christopher, MB; Anonymous; J K Monro, FRCS . . . . .	1427
<b>Seat belts and risk compensation</b> R James, BM; M Mackay, DSC . . . . .	1422	<b>Contraceptives and the under 16s</b> T N Griffiths, MRCGP; T Leary; P Doherty . . . . .	1425	<b>Points</b> Imported malaria in Britain (D L Cohen); A prolonged passage to India (J W L Parry); Cutaneous amoebiasis (J Gradon); Food poisoning (D C A Candy); False premise behind prescribing figures (P H Brunyate); Book review writing for beginners (A D Farr); Forensic pathology; the chronic crisis (J G Benstead, D J Gee); Does aggressive sport protect against exercise induced asthma? (A Chivers); Phantom pregnancy (S Lal and T Tulandi) . . . . .	1428
<b>Are coronary artery spasm and progressive damage to the heart associated with the hyperventilation syndrome?</b> M A James, MRCP, and others; Leisa J Freeman, MRCP, and P G F Nixon, FRCP . . . . .	1423	<b>Calcium channel blocking agents and the heart</b> H P Davis, MRCPATH . . . . .	1425	<b>Corrections:</b> <b>Intrauterine growth retardation</b> (Ounsted) . . . . .	1428
		<b>Valuation of life</b> P A West, DPHIL . . . . .	1425	<b>Contraceptives and the under 16s</b> (Woodroffe and McClinton) . . . . .	1428
		<b>Overseas doctors training scheme</b> N D Wright, FRCGP . . . . .	1426		
		<b>Psychiatric care for the mentally handicapped</b> D Chakraborti, MRCPsych . . . . .	1426		
		<b>"Eating for a healthier heart"</b> J S Garrow, FRCPED . . . . .	1426		

*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.*

## How accurate are quotations and references in medical journals?

SIR,—The excellent paper by Dr Gerald de Lacey and his colleagues (28 September, p 884) prompts me to pose two questions. Firstly, does good scholarship require so many references? Secondly, would the proportion of errors be smaller if there were fewer references?

In seeking to answer these I start from the proposition that the sole purpose of references is to help the reader and not to demonstrate the breadth of the author's knowledge. References in review articles are the source data and so they must be listed. But in papers on "original" research their purpose is to set the background of the work and to provide comparison and contrast to the findings. In this case too few references will leave the work isolated from the general corpus of knowledge but too many, especially those not of immediate relevance, can only confuse.

Much of the problem of inaccurate referencing stems from an inability of authors to separate wheat from chaff; indeed, they may not themselves have actually read some of the chaff. The medical literature is so large and of such uneven quality that authors would be doing us all a service if they allowed many potential references to rest in obscurity. I contend that prolix referencing flows from a desire of authors to be seen as "scholarly." This may be a consequence of the distorted values propagated by universities, since research students

are often required to embark on huge, and usually (for the reader) exceedingly boring, literature reviews before they may begin original research.

A related phenomenon is spurious scholasticism. My hypothesis is that the number of references per hundred words of text is inversely proportional to the theoretical coherence of a field of knowledge. For example, physicists do not refer to Newton's original writings every time they use his mechanics, whereas social scientists have a tendency to cite an original source for the seemingly most trivial insight. Perhaps someone, in true Popperian spirit, would wish to engage in research to falsify my hypothesis? If so, I hope that this letter will be in their reference list.

A S ST LEGER

Department of Community Medicine,  
University of Manchester,  
Manchester M13 9PT

SIR,—As guest editors for a recent special issue of the *British Journal of Medical Psychology*<sup>1</sup> we were impressed by the high incidence of inaccuracy in submitted papers. This was particularly true of initial submissions. Some authors were more careless than others in making omissions in citation or in not following the appropriate method of referencing, but errors of one sort or another were

present in most papers. As far as we could tell, and from the comments of outside assessors, where errors of quotation existed these resulted from careless expression. Thus, we were interested to note that Dr Gerald de Lacey and colleagues found, "In most instances errors were caused by either carelessness or misleading use of language" (28 September, p 884).

Because of our concern about the distortions created by misleading errors of quotation, as well as the inconvenience caused by inaccuracy in referencing, we fully support the authors' suggestions that editors should sample references from each paper and, when errors are found, not only return the paper for rechecking but also delay publication and that journals should carry a column entitled "Misquotations" where seriously misquoted authors would have a voice.

Our only criticism of these suggestions is that generally praise tends to be better than punishment in shaping behaviour. Further thought should therefore be given to positively reinforcing authors who have a high standard of accuracy. Possibly an editors' letter of acceptance or rejection to an author could explicitly comment either negatively or positively on the standard of quotation and citation. Procedures of this sort should go some way towards encouraging greater care and accuracy in contributions to academic journals. As