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PROCUREMENT SECTION
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LEADING ARTICLES

Treating Cushing's disease	W J JEFFCOATE	227
Acanthamoeba keratitis	D L EASTY	228
Severe open fractures of the tibia: the courage to amputate	F W HEATLEY	229
Adenovirus gastroenteritis	D J WOOD	229
The downs and ups of infant mortality	ALISON MACFARLANE	230
Acheson: a missed opportunity for the new public health	JOHN ASHTON	231

CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

Variability in vibration perception threshold among sites: a potential source of error in biothesiometry	GARETH WILLIAMS, JASWINDER S GILL, VIC ABER, HUGH M MATHER	233
Effective lipid lowering diets including lean meat	G F WATTS, W AHMED, J QUINEY, R HOULSTON, P JACKSON, C ILES, B LEWIS	235
Antigen detection in primary HIV infection	M VON SYDOW, H GAINES, A SÖNNERBORG, M FORSGREN, P O PEHRSON, Ö STRANNEGÅRD	238
Postpartum thyroid dysfunction in Mid Glamorgan	HEDY Y M FUNG, MINOSH KOLOGLU, KATE COLLISON, R JOHN, C J RICHARDS, R HALL, A M MCGREGOR	241
Malaria in Britain: 1977-86	P A PHILLIPS-HOWARD, D J BRADLEY, M BLAZE, M HURN	245
Maternal administration of flecainide to terminate and suppress fetal tachycardia	CHRISTOPHER WREN, STEWART HUNTER	249
High dose intravenous methylprednisolone or high dose intravenous gammaglobulin for autoimmune thrombocytopenia	A E G KR VON DEM BORNE, J J E VOS, J G PEGELS, L L M THOMAS, H VAN DER LELIE	249
Antenatal factors associated with obstruction of the gastrointestinal tract by meconium	M BLOTT, A GREENOUGH, H R GAMSU, K NICOLAIDES, S CAMPBELL	250
Development of long term use of psychotropic drugs by general practice patients	ANDREA MANT, PAUL DUNCAN-JONES, DEBORAH SALTMAN, CHARLES BRIDGES-WEBB, LINDA KEHOE, GWENDA LANSBURY, ALAN H B CHANCELLOR	251

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Use of personal computers in a teaching hospital in Zambia	I H WILSON, D A K WATTERS	255
ABC of Dermatology: Viral infections	P K BUXTON	257
New Drugs: Anti-infectives	ROGER FINCH	261
Conversations with Consultants: Dr F the physician	TONY SMITH	265
The funding of medical research: going up or coming down?	RICHARD SMITH	267
Nursing Grievances: IV: Not a profession, not a career	TONY DELAMOTHE	271
What should psychiatrists be doing in the 1990s?	GLIN BENNET	274
Everyday Aids and Appliances: Collars and corsets	G J HUSTON	276
Letter from Chicago: Matters of turf	GEORGE DUNEA	277
Portraits from Memory: 24—Sir Graham Wilson, FRS (1895-1987)	SIR JAMES HOWIE	279
Osteolytic lesions in an elderly diabetic woman	ALEXANDER FOSS, HUGH MARKUS	280
Any Questions?		264, 275, 278, 281
Materia Non Medica—Contribution from DAVID W HIDE		256
Words	B J FREEDMAN	276
Medicine and Books		282
What's new in the new editions?	CLIFFORD HAWKINS	284
Personal View	DAVID SEDDON	287

CORRESPONDENCE—List of Contents	288
---------------------------------	-----

OBITUARY	299
----------	-----

NEWS AND NOTES

Views	295
Medical News	296
BMA Notices	297
Scientifically Speaking	BERNARD DIXON 298

SUPPLEMENT

The Week	301
Make or break year for NHS?	JOHN WARDEN 302
Return of the public health doctor: Acheson report boosts public health	303
Early and partial retirement for consultants	305
GMC professional conduct committee	306

CORRESPONDENCE

Testing for HIV: the non-medicolegal view

A J Keidan, MRCP, and others 288

HIV screening in an emergency department

A Gisselback, MD, and others 288

Doctors and rubella

Anna Aveline, MRCPATH, and others 288

The new surgery

J A Shepherd, FRCS; A M Smith, FRCOG 289

King's College Hospital

C Sunderland and E Glucksman, MRCP 289

Micrometastases in bone marrow in patients with breast cancer

M Untch, MD, and others 290

Charging patients for eye tests

A J Bron, FRCS; R J H Smith, FRCS; J D Scott, FRCS, and D Flanagan, FRCS 290

Treatment of Paget's disease of bone

D C Anderson, FRCP, and Judy C Cantrill 291

Caffeine and health

B K Jacobsen, MD, and V Hansen, MD 291

Clinical experimentation in obstetrics

D F Hawkins, FRCOG 291

Leucocyte sodium pump activity after meals or insulin

J Main, MRCP, and others 292

Child abuse and osteogenesis imperfecta

L S Taitz, FRCP; Helen Carty, FRCR, and D G Shaw, FRCR 292

Free radicals and Dupuytren's contracture

J M Outhwaite, BM, and others 292

The natural course of gold nephropathy

CL Hall, MRCP 293

Contraceptive services for ethnic minorities

Jill Tattersall, MB, and Jennifer Wordsworth, MB 293

Treatment of cardiac arrest by ambulance staff

Geraldine Walters, BSC, and E Glucksman, MRCP 293

Sequential hormonochemotherapy in advanced breast cancer

LL Hart, MD 293

Management of retinal vein occlusion

P Merry, MRCP, and others 294

Obstetricians on the labour ward

A F Pentecost, FRCOG 294

Time to stop putting the clocks back?

Jean Wilson, MB; M Hillman 294

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- No letter should be more than 400 words.
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- Because we receive many more letters than we can publish we may shorten those we do print, particularly when we receive several on the same subject.

Testing for HIV: the non-medicolegal view

SIR,—The medicolegal aspects of testing for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) without consent have recently been clarified, but less emphasis has been given to the psychological aspects of this debate. As the case below illustrates, an unexpected positive HIV result, in the absence of pretest counselling, may severely compromise subsequent management owing to a destruction of the patient-doctor relationship, quite apart from the risk of litigation.

We have recently seen a young woman with sickle cell disease and severe progressive cervical and axillary lymphadenopathy. No risk factors for HIV were identified from the initial history, and an extensive battery of investigations was performed. HIV serology was performed as a "last resort" when other investigations, including lymph node biopsy, failed to produce a diagnosis. In this case the test was done without the patient's knowledge or consent, as it was considered unlikely that the result would be positive.

Three serum samples were, however, repeatedly positive by several enzyme linked immunosorbent assay techniques and immunofluorescence. The patient was questioned further about possible risk factors for HIV. During a two year stay in the United States (1984-6) she had received no blood transfusions, but she did recall a three unit transfusion in the United Kingdom in 1984. The three donors were subsequently shown to be HIV negative. Drug abuse was denied, and both sexual partners were negative for HIV more than three months after the last exposure.

The absence of pretest counselling and perceived risk factors in this case has made her subsequent management very difficult. To date, 12 months after the initial positive HIV result, she has refused to accept the diagnosis, requesting repeat second opinions and serological analysis and failing to attend for outpatient follow up.

We are therefore left with a dilemma. In the absence of identifiable risk factors from the history

should we have tested the patient for HIV at an earlier stage, avoiding multiple investigations but, with pretest consent and counselling, causing possible "unnecessary anxiety," or should HIV tests be performed as part of the routine diagnostic investigations, with counselling only for those patients in whom a positive diagnosis is made? Although the second course of action is in line with previous medical practice—for example, tests for syphilis and hepatitis B—the more serious and far reaching implications of HIV infection make pretest counselling advisable. Such a policy, which accords with the medicolegal view, will also facilitate further patient care in the event of a positive result.

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HIV screening in an emergency department

SIR,—In a recent issue (7 November, p 1205) the necessity of obtaining consent before testing for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was discussed. This need not be an important problem if, as we think, most people will give consent when asked.

We are planning a long term systematic study of the prevalence of HIV in all patients seen in the emergency department of our hospital. Most patients admitted to our hospital pass through the emergency department, which is thus a strategic location for systematic testing. The purpose of the study is to gain knowledge about the prevalence of HIV in the community and also to define better

those groups in whom precautions should be taken against accidental transmission of HIV. Swiss regulations prohibit testing for HIV without the patient's consent; we therefore conducted a short pilot study to investigate the feasibility of systematic testing.

During a 30 hour period 84 consecutive patients seen in the emergency department were asked to consent to HIV testing. Twenty patients were unable to give informed consent (three patients died, 16 were confused or comatose, and language barriers made communication impossible in one). Among 64 patients asked 60 (94%) responded favourably. The four patients who refused were interviewed by one of us: only one was in a high risk group for HIV infection. Testing for HIV was negative in all but two patients, who were already known to be HIV carriers.

The high acceptance rate is encouraging if screening is to be done in a facility—for example, an outpatient clinic—where almost all patients are conscious and orientated. In a general purpose emergency department, however, many confused or comatose patients will be unable to give informed consent. We hope to gain permission to perform anonymous testing in these patients to determine how many are HIV carriers.

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Doctors and rubella

SIR,—We support Dr Aileen Fogarty's plea (21 November, p 1348) for vaccination of non-immune doctors, both men and women, against rubella. An incident here last year emphasised for us the risk to