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LEADING ARTICLES

Eclampsia still kills	C W G REDMAN	1209
Estimating with confidence	MARTIN J GARDNER, DOUGLAS G ALTMAN	1210
Adrenal and nigral transplants for Parkinson's disease	J M S PEARCE	1211
Ethics of fetal brain cell transplants	RAANAN GILLON	1212
Penicillin allergy: how to diagnose and when to treat	STEPHEN T HOLGATE	1213
Tumour necrosis factor	SALEEM MALIK, FRANCES R BALKWILL	1214
Transatlantic warning bells sound on rheumatic fever	J G BISSENDEN	1215
Tackling the bad driver	JOHN HAVARD	1215

CLINICAL RESEARCH • PAPERS AND SHORT REPORTS • PRACTICE OBSERVED

Weight loss in obese subjects on a restricted diet given BRL 26830A, a new atypical β adrenoceptor agonist	A A CONNACHER, R T JUNG, P E G MITCHELL	1217
Inequalities in women's health: looking at mortality differentials using an alternative approach	KATH A MOSER, HELENA S PUGH, PETER O GOLDBLATT	1221
Decline in measles mortality: nutrition, age at infection, or exposure?	PETER AABY, JETTE BUKH, IDA MARIA LISSE, MARIA CLOTILDE DA SILVA	1225
Delays in diagnosing and treating bladder cancer	M J STOWER	1228
Response to D-Trp-6-luteinising hormone releasing hormone (Decapeptyl) microcapsules in advanced ovarian cancer	H PARMAR, G RUSTIN, S L LIGHTMAN, R H PHILLIPS, I W HANHAM, A V SCHALLY	1229
Antidepressant drugs in the elderly: Are the indications as long term as the treatment?	ANTHONY J DUNCAN, A JOHN CAMPBELL	1230

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Mistakes in diagnosing non-accidental injury: 10 years' experience	DAVID M WHEELER, CHRISTOPHER J HOBBS	1233
Gas gangrene: a cautionary tale	C R KIRK, J C DORGAN, C A HART	1236
Statistics in Medicine: Calculating confidence intervals for regression and correlation	DOUGLAS G ALTMAN, MARTIN J GARDNER	1238
Prospective study of aetiological factors in burning mouth syndrome	P-J LAMEY, A B LAMB	1243
Outpatients: can we save time and reduce waiting lists?	M DUNCAN, K BEALE, J PARRY, R A MILLER	1247
Everyday Aids and Appliances: Stomas and appliances	PAUL FINAN	1249
Letter from Chicago: Distrust	GEORGE DUNEA	1251
Medicine and Books		1253
Words	B J FREEDMAN	1237, 1242
Any Questions?		1246
Personal View	J D HAMLETT	1256

CORRESPONDENCE — List of Contents	1257
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OBITUARY	1268
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NEWS AND NOTES

Views	1264
Medical News	1265
BMA Notices	1266
Scientifically Speaking	BERNARD DIXON 1267

SUPPLEMENT

The Week	1270
Government funds doctors' and nurses' awards in full	1271
From the JCC: Pressures to tighten up disciplinary procedures	1273
From the GMSC: Pressures of caring for drug misusers	1275

CORRESPONDENCE

Heroin addicts, AIDS, and aflatoxins R G Hendrickse, FRCP, and S M Maxwell, MB	1257	Wheelchairs M A Tudor, MB; J B Young, MRCP	1259	Drug points Generalised chorea due to digoxin toxicity (L J M M Mulder and others); Neutropenia caused by intravenous immunoglobulin (R V Majer and P J Green); Purpuric rash associated with slow release morphine (R J Whiston and others); Gynaecomastia associated with captopril (H M Markusse and R H B Meyboom)	1262
β Blockers, lipids, and coronary atherosclerosis A Ramani, MD, and others	1257	Psychiatric illness among British Afro-Caribbeans J Merrill, MRCPsych, and J Owens, MB	1260	Points Griffiths on community care (B R W Lodge; M Warren); Transporting critically ill patients (P Meyer); Late life depression: undertreated? (H P Rosenvinge; Som D Soni); How informed is signed consent? (Diane E Wallis); Home visiting by consultants (D Brodie); Osteoporosis in elderly Chinese (Edith M C Lau); A slip of the knife (C Illingworth); Ammonia burns of the eye (O Wrong)	1263
Surgical aspects of drug smuggling E Clifford, MB, and others	1258	The need to make rugby safer J Piggot, FRCS	1260		
Urinary catheters S L Stanton, FRCOG; D J Waghorn, MB, and others; C M Castleden, FRCP, and others	1258	Hypoglycaemia in patients with insulin dependent diabetes I Sturgess, MRCP, and others	1260		
Sexual dysfunction among middle aged women Ruth Skrine, MRCP; B M Goss, MRCP	1259	Körner, nomenclature, and SNOMED B W Ellis, FRCS	1261		
Death despite malaria prophylaxis E L C Ong, MRCP, and E M Dunbar, MRCP	1259	Interview for medical student selection W F M Wallace, FRCP; D A Powis, PhD, and others	1261		
Clinical carpal scaphoid injuries J J Langham-Brown, FRCS	1259	Achieving a balance P McDonald, FRCS, and A McIrvine, FRCS	1261		

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- No letter should be more than 400 words.
- For letters on scientific subjects we normally reserve our correspondence columns for those relating to issues discussed recently (within six weeks) in the *BMJ*.
- We do not routinely acknowledge letters. Please send a stamped addressed envelope if you would like an acknowledgment.
- 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.

Heroin addicts, AIDS, and aflatoxins

SIR,—Dr S M Lamplugh and others (2 April, p 968) show that in Africa many children are continuously or intermittently exposed to aflatoxins, and this is supported by other studies.^{1,2} Aflatoxins have oncogenic and immunosuppressive effects that may influence the pattern of infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which seems to be more prevalent and aggressive in African children than would be predicted from experience elsewhere.

In Britain HIV infection in heroin addicts is a cause for concern. Heroin arrives here by circuitous and clandestine routes after storage and packaging in various unconventional ways. We considered it likely that heroin on sale in the United Kingdom would be naturally contaminated before the dealers added their various contaminants. We contacted the Merseyside drug squad to obtain samples of heroin for analysis to determine whether it showed evidence of contamination with aflatoxin.

Eleven samples were supplied to us and analysed under police surveillance (at our request) in our laboratories.

The first six were contaminated heavily by undetermined substances and required complicated extraction procedures before they could be analysed for their aflatoxin content. Two of these samples were positive for aflatoxin B₁ and contained 507 and 1346 pg/g of heroin respectively. Because of the clean up procedures needed we are confident that the amount of aflatoxin recovered was an underestimate of the true content of the samples. The second batch of five samples was purer and required less preparation before analysis. One of these samples contained 9616 pg of aflatoxin B₁ in each gram.

Intravenous heroin users are probably intermittently injecting aflatoxin B₁ into their systemic circulation. An important difference between this kind of exposure and that from food contamination is that after absorption from the gut some or all of the aflatoxin is detoxified by the liver. Intravenous heroin users thus risk direct systemic exposure to aflatoxin B₁. One consequence of this is suppression of cell mediated immunity.

In view of the unusual epidemiology and aggressive behaviour of HIV infection in children in Africa, who are highly exposed to aflatoxins, and the serious problem of HIV infection in drug abusers in Britain, we think that the interaction of HIV infection and aflatoxin exposure demands urgent further investigation. We have delayed reporting these results pending analysis of urine

samples from heroin addicts to detect aflatoxin excretion. Unfortunately, almost a year after our first approaches to colleagues working with drug addicts we are still awaiting specimens. We would be pleased to examine urine for aflatoxin content from any drug users currently injecting heroin.

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- 1 Hendrickse RG, Coulter JBS, Lamplugh SM, et al. Aflatoxins and kwashiorkor: a study in Sudanese children. *Br Med J* 1982;285:843-6.
- 2 Coulter JBS, Hendrickse RG, Lamplugh SML, et al. Aflatoxins and kwashiorkor: clinical studies in Sudanese children. *Trans R Soc Trop Med Hyg* 1986;80:945-51.

 β Blockers, lipids, and coronary atherosclerosis

SIR,—We fully agree with Dr Robin J Northcote (12 March, p 731) that, though there is convincing evidence that β blockers alter the plasma lipoprotein profile,^{1,3} it would not be advisable to abandon their use in patients with hypertension or coronary artery disease. There is compelling evidence from several studies⁴⁻⁶ that β blockers administered long term after myocardial infarction reduce both mortality (by 26-39%) and the incidence of non-fatal infarction, the favourable effect persisting at least for three years. In the β blocker heart attack trial propranolol decreased the incidence of sudden death by 13% in patients without heart failure and by 47% in patients who

had prior heart failure by improving ischaemia and preventing reinfarction.⁷

We estimated serum total cholesterol, triglyceride, lipoprotein cholesterol subfractions (high density (HDL), low density, and very low density), apo A, apo B, and ratios obtained from these variables in 56 patients with coronary artery disease. Based on their smoking habit and intake of propranolol (120 to 240 mg daily for over four weeks) the patients were subgrouped as follows: (a) non-smokers not taking propranolol (n=10); (b) smokers taking propranolol (n=12); and (c) non-smokers taking propranolol (n=10). Significantly lower values ($p<0.01$) of HDL cholesterol,